The function of religion in *Silas Marner* and *The Slave*

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Käsittelen tässä tutkielmassa uskonnon funktiota niissä yhteisöissä, joissa sillä on vaikutusvaltaa. Lähestyn aihetta kristillisisistä ja juutalaisista näkökulmista. Tutkimukseni keskeinen kysymys piilee siinä, mikä on uskonnon tehtävä yhteiskunnassa. Pohjaan tätä funktionalistista lähestymistapaa erityisesti Emile Durkheimin ja David Sloan Wilsonin teeseihin. Durkheim määrittelee uskonnon hyvin laveasti: uskontoa on se, mitä yhteisön ihmiset pitävät pyhänä. Wilson puolestaan painottaa niitä konkreettisia tapoja, joilla uskonto edesauttaa ihmisten harmonista yhteiseloa ja parantaa yhteisön selviytymisen edellytyksiä. Molempien ajattelussa korostuu uskonnon sosiaalinen luonne ja sen tärkeä rooli ryhmänmuodostuksessa.

Tämän lisäksi tarkastelen funktionalistista lähestymistapaa osana laajempaa konservatiivisen ajattelun perinnettä. Konservatiivisessa ajattelussa painotetaan perinteitä, yhteiskunnallisia instituutiota, historiallista jatkuvuutta, inhimillisiä rajoitteita ja yksilön roolia yhteisön jäsenenä. Uskonto liittyy vahvasti näihin kaikkiin ja uskonnon tarkoituksenmukaisuutta painottava analyysi on linjassa konservatiivisen ajatusperinteen kanssa.

Kirjallisuus on erinomainen tapa lähestyä tätä aihepiiriä, sillä sitä kautta on mahdollista hyödyntää sulavasti elementtejä eri tieteenhaaroista ja välttää vallitsevia maailmankatsomuksellisia paradigmakiistoja. Sikäli kun kirjallisuudella on kyky kertoa meille jotain ihmisluonnosta, on kirjallisuuteen pohjaava lähestymistapa perusteltu. Sovellan uskonnon tarkoituksenmukaisuutta korostavaa analyysia kahteen romaaniin: George Eliotin *Silas Marner* ja Isaac Bashevis Singerin *The Slave*. Romaanit käsittelevät uskontoa yhtäältä yksilön sielunelämän kannalta, toisaalta yhteiskunnallisesta näkökulmasta. Teosten välittämä ihmiskuva tukee funktionalistista yleiseetosta, jonka mukaan uskonto mahdollistaa ihmisten laajamittaisen yhteistyön ja tekee yhteiskunnasta yhtenäisen.

Avainsanat: uskonto, funktio, yhteistyö, yhteiskunta, konservatismi

Contents

1 Introduction

My goal in this thesis is to study religion's purpose in two novels: George Eliot's *Silas Marner* (1861) and Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Slave* (1962). By purpose I mean religion's functioning in the societies described, or the various benefits that religion offers to its adherents and to the communities where it holds influence. My study will be based on a functionalist approach to the study of religion. In modern discussion a simplistic anti-religious attitude is quite common; religion has been described as a parasite, a poison, a virus, an opiate, as non-essential cultural baggage. However, I am convinced that a functionalist approach is more effective when trying to understand religion's purpose and lasting importance. This approach is what I will illustrate and utilise in the course of this paper. I will also discuss the functionalist approach to religion in the larger framework of conservative thought that I argue functionalism is a part of.

The targets of the resulting analysis, which were written a century apart from each other, are obviously different yet at times strikingly similar. One focuses on Christianity, the other on Judaism, and while the tone and angle of the discussion is different, in both novels the communal nature of religion is a crucial theme. Eliot's and Singer's novels offer a fascinating literary testing ground for this approach to the analysis of religion. The central question throughout will be: what is the function of religion?

One might contest this approach utterly, arguing that the study and analysis of literature can have nothing of value to say on this, or perhaps any, issue. Such a complete rejection of the worth of literature is a position so powerful that I believe it is beyond my means to convince anyone to let go of. At any rate, it is true that in addition to philology my chosen topic could well be discussed from the perspective of sociology, anthropology, theology, philosophy, history, or biology – I will in fact make use of most if not all of said fields in the course of this paper. Nevertheless, I argue that philology offers an exceptionally fit foundation, standing on relatively neutral ground, able to benefit from the thinking in all those different fields surrounding it. This becomes a particular boon

when one is reminded of the enduring problems resulting from different metaphysical premises (naturalism versus theism, for example), which cause conflict in the aforementioned fields and make synergistic approaches more difficult. I would argue that a philological, literary approach is able to circumvent this conflict. Should we accept that literature has the capacity to reveal us something valuable about the human condition, then a literary approach is well justified.

Finally, a few preliminary points on terminology. In this thesis I will be using the concepts "functional" and "adaptive" in a virtually interchangeable fashion. *Functionalism* is in fact a somewhat more general term, describing a pragmatic approach to the study of social phenomena, in this case religion. What is religion's function, and what practical benefits does it offer to the societies where it holds influence? This word is used particularly in the sphere of the social sciences. *Adaptivity* is a more specific concept, having to do with natural and cultural evolution. In practice, however, what is adaptive is also functional. For my intents and purposes the two words can be used nigh on synonymously.

Out of the two central scholars I rely on, Emile Durkheim moves within the more general realm of social functionalism, whereas David Sloan Wilson as an evolutionist focuses more specifically on the angle of adaptivity. This difference in focus is reflected in my use of vocabulary in each case. It should be noted that the use of the word *adaptive* does have the particular benefit of focusing one's attention more keenly on the evolutionary aspects of religion.

Religion itself is more difficult to pin down, perhaps particularly so in this study. How I and most of my sources generally use the word matches reasonably well with the everyday understanding of the concept. *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* (1998) offers several definitions, all of which are quite useful:

religion

1. the belief in and worship of a supernatural controlling power, especially a personal God or gods.
2. details of belief as taught or discussed
3. a particular system of faith and worship
4. a pursuit of interest to which someone ascribes supreme importance. (ODE, 1567)

In the initial definition there is a clear emphasis on gods and the supernatural. The final definitions, however, are more general. The last two definitions combined approach what Emile Durkheim calls a religion. The final and most general definition is as hazardously wide in *The New Oxford Dictionary of English* as it is in Durkheim's writing. The purpose behind such a vague definition – as well as its merits and demerits – will be touched on in a recurring fashion.

2 Conservative tradition of thought

In this section I will offer a general outline of conservative thought while illustrating how conservatism relates to religion. In addition I will present the more concrete case made by C.S. Lewis as a bridge between the theoretical background and more practical Christian thought.

2.1 What is conservatism?

In modern discussion, conservatism is often equated with either free market-capitalism (in the sense of *fiscal-conservatism*) or the Christian-right (in the sense of *social conservatism*). This is a likely consequence of the long-standing political situation in America, with the Tea Party-movement as a notable example. However, in truth conservatism cannot be described simply as capitalism or Christianity – there is no necessary contradiction between being an economically left-leaning agnostic, and being a conservative. It may well be that going forward the common conception of conservatism will no longer be so often truncated into capitalism and Christianity. This is in part due to the changing political climate in Europe, where newly formed conservative parties have entered the field. They neither mesh with the described American model, nor do they accept the prevailing liberalism of the pre-existing, nominally conservative parties. This is bound to affect the way conservatism is perceived and discussed.

In this section I will illustrate the wider tradition of thought called conservatism, and in so doing highlight the intellectual origins of religious functionalism. Jerry Z. Muller offers a learned recounting of what constitutes conservatism in the West (*Conservatism*, 10–18), and I will be making use of his observations as the foundation for this section.

Among the most important features of conservative thought is a deep seated distrust of human nature. Human beings are seen as flawed and corrupt, and they need to be guided into good behaviour through strict constraints, both internal and external. In the conservative framework, a man who simply follows his desires is a fundamentally destructive force. Only through restraining

his natural desires can he ever be virtuous. Hence, conservatives regard with scepticism all attempts at "liberating" individuals. This connects to the topic of religion more specifically, and to the notion that faith in God and a desire for liberty are mutually exclusive in the final reckoning. One or the other must yield. James Fitzjames Stephen argued the point in the following way:

> …for I know not what can be a greater infringement of his [John Stuart Mill's] theory of liberty, a more complete and formal contradiction to it, than the doctrine that there are a court and a judge in which, and before whom, every man must give an account of every work done in the body, whether self-regarding or not. (*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, 193)

According to the conservative tradition of thought, freedom is only desirable under very specific circumstances, which depend on powerful social institutions that restrict the behaviour of individuals. As T.E. Hulme argues ("Essays on War", 254), were the world inherently good and progress inevitable, then what is good in this world could never come under any serious threat. Some moral magnetism would always drive things towards harmony and bliss, if not temporarily interrupted by misguided people. For conservatives, however, chaos and turmoil constitute the norm towards which everything always travels. Whenever one encounters any semblance of order he should do his utmost to preserve it and not take it for granted.

Related to human imperfection, conservatives are critical of all societal theories. Human cognition is limited and unreliable, and society so incredibly complex that no mind is great enough to be able to truly understand it, or keen enough to devise a workable theory that will satisfyingly describe it or predict its future.

Consequently, the conservative tradition is critical of rationalism – the act of making reason the single guiding force in decision making and judgment. Instead, conservatives lift alongside it tradition, intuition, habit and prejudice. The argument is that most people most of the time are incapable of successfully evaluating the social rules that bind them, and if we encourage such intrinsically flawed people to question the rules rationally, the results will be disastrous. Instead, conservatives argue that we should emphasise duty and prejudice – "the subjective acceptance of

existing social rules conveyed through socialization and habit…. the best guide for most people most of the time." (Muller, 11) Non-voluntary obedience and allegiance are seen as valuable and desirable traits in individuals and in societies. David Hume argues ("On the Origins of Government", 49) that in order to attain any justice, we must first have obedience. Obedience itself cannot be based on cold-headed reasoning. All the high-minded theories of rational social contracts are at odds with experience. Instead, obedience must be founded on top of tradition, habit, and intuition. In general, conservatives greatly appreciate hierarchy and authority, and abhor their abolition.

Conservatism can be described as anti-humanitarian. This is because it places institutions above individuals. In fact this description may be more abrasive than the reality beneath, since the reason why institutions are valued above individuals is because well-functioning social institutions are considered a necessary condition for any individual well-being to be maintained in the long term:

> Time and again conservative analysts argue that humanitarian motivation, combined with abstraction from reality, lead reformers to policies that promote behaviour which is destructive of the institutions upon which human flourishing depends…. When conservatives acknowledge the demands of institutions and the needs of individuals, their thought may take on a tragic dimension and an insistence upon the limits of human happiness. (*Conservatism*, 17 – 18)

Conservatives are prone to arguing that it is quite acceptable that some individuals suffer if their suffering is required as a sacrifice for maintaining solid institutions. For instance, the existence of a number of unhappy marriages under strict divorce laws may be considered an acceptable price if we are to gain greater social order, unity and longevity as a result of the strict laws. This is to say that the fate of any single individual, or some particular minority, does not necessarily sway the conservative thought process. In this sense it is anti-humanitarian.

In the conservative tradition social institutions and traditions are valued above all else, and furthermore it is argued that virtually all traditions and institutions hold manifold latent functions

that an observer will not be able to perceive. This leads to unintended consequences every time a tradition is lost or an institution altered. A characteristic conservative reply to a reformer is to point out that things may be bad, but they could always get worse.

Conservatives generally argue that traditions, habits and institutions offer reliable guidance because they gain their authority from history. A conservative would insist that our ancestors were not stupid. If a tradition has survived for many generations, its very longevity and survival speak for the beneficial nature of the tradition in question. This view is in many respects similar to natural selection in biology – harmful or useless traditions would never have gained ground or endured for long. Often we cannot rationally understand why a given tradition is worth maintaining, as its benefits tend to be latent and indirect. As Irving Kristol phrased the issue, conservatism assumes "that institutions which have existed for a long period of time have a reason and a purpose inherent in them, a collective wisdom incarnate in them, and the fact that we don't perfectly understand or cannot perfectly explain why they 'work' is no defect in them but a merely a limitation in us." ("Utopianism, Ancient and Modern", 161)

Tradition is to be understood not just as a collection of old customs, but as a literal inheritance. The contemporary conservative philosopher Roger Scruton argues ("How I Became a Conservative?" 13–14) that the Burkean model of conservatism dismisses the idea of social contracts, and replaces it with the *hereditary principle*. The generations currently alive hold all power. They can rule tyrannically, and disinherit the unborn by squandering or neglecting the inheritance of the previous generations. "[R]espect for the dead was […] the only real safeguard that the unborn could obtain, in a world that gave all its privileges to the living." (ibid. 14) Following this line of thinking, should we still wish to understand society contractually, the only meaningful social contract exists between the dead, the living, and the yet unborn.

Finally, and most importantly for my purposes, conservatism emphasises the utility of religion. It can be argued that this is an amalgamation of all the principles aforementioned. Religion

is a massive social institution, which constitutes an interconnected network of inherited traditions, hierarchies, habits, duties, moral injunctions, and is very effective at constraining flawed individuals and tempering our desires.

On the surface level it may be impossible to understand why a given religious belief or social rule is worth maintaining, or to see rational sense in it. The benefits are again quite often latent and indirect. Of course, this has nothing to do with the truth of the matter. It is quite possible for a given religion to be false but useful. This highlights the way how the conservative focus differs from the rationalist focus. In the words of the much lauded conservative thinker Edmund Burke:

> Political problems do not primarily concern truth or falsehood. They relate to good or evil. What in the result is likely to produce evil, is politically false: that which is productive of good, politically is true. ("An Appeal from the New to the Old Whigs" p.163)

For a rationalist, what matters most is the distinction between truth and falsehood. In contrast, a conservative would emphasise the practicalities: following the truth into a disaster is not wisdom. On the other hand, something fictional, or at least utterly unprovable, can offer benefits otherwise unavailable. I will elucidate this crucial point in the following sections.

2.2 C.S. Lewis and the moral law

C.S. Lewis will prove useful in tying together the more general conservative approach and the more specific functional analysis of religion. Lewis' writing inhabits both fields and functions as a bridge. C.S. Lewis was a famous Christian apologetic in the middle decades of the 20th century, whose views on the nature of Christianity should prove useful in illustrating the moral and social character of the Christian religion from the perspective of someone inside the faith itself, and not merely an outside observer. In this section I will draw on from Lewis' famous book *Mere Christianity*. Lewis' model on the relationship between law and morality here outlined will be of particular use in my analysis of *Silas Marner* and offers us the first example of how the function of religious thought is connected to seemingly secular institutions such as the rule of law.

Lewis points out (*Mere Christianity*, 19) an alarming dead-end. A man may ask, why should he be unselfish? An explanation can be given to him, saying it is for the good of the society as a whole that he behaves well, and by being part of the society he stands to benefit. A list of practical social benefits may be offered. However, he may ask a further question: Why should he care about the well-being of the society as a whole even in cases where it is not of any use to him personally? Even when he himself has to sacrifice something as a consequence? We can only answer: Because you should not be selfish. Following Lewis, the truth innate in the virtue of selflessness can only be held as self-evident; pragmatic reasoning can only take us so far. Rationalism is found insufficient.

Lewis provides the useful analogy (ibid. 19) of a man who is wondering about the purpose of playing football. He can be explained that the point is to score goals. But this explanation is just as empty as the one previously described. In the same vein, benefiting the people around us is not the reason why we ought to behave unselfishly. It is simply a way of phrasing the contents of selfless behaviour, a description of its character. Similarly, scoring goals is not a palatable explanation for why football is played, simply a description of how the game works.

To get beyond empty pragmatics, to reach a more satisfying answer to the question, "Why ought I to behave well?" Lewis offers the concept of moral law (ibid. 20) as answer. This is a law which we can find in human nature and which assumes a concrete form in Christianity. According to Lewis, moral law exists apart from us yet is pressing on us at all times. We instinctively know we ought to obey it even when we do not want to. When we do break it, we hasten to provide excuses as to why it was acceptable to break the moral law in our specific, exceptional case. We do not decide the law's contents, it is not based on what we might find expedient. The moral law functions as a great social force that pushes individuals into socially beneficial behaviour, whether they personally stand to benefit or not.

Lewis' argument aligns quite well with Joseph de Maistre (*Generative Principle of Human Institutions*, 137). In Maistre's view the essence of a fundamental law is that it cannot be abolished.

However, if laws are to be considered human constructs, then how is it beyond us to abolish laws we ourselves have crafted? According to Maistre, for laws to hold any sway, belief in God is a fundamental requirement. In the words of Nicolas-Sylvestre Bergier: "Promises, engagements, and oaths are mere words, it is as easy to break these trifling bonds as it is to forge them. Without the dogma of a law-giving God, all moral obligations are chimerical. Force on the one side and powerlessness on the other, that would be the only bond of human society." (*Traite historique et dogmatique de la religion,* 137)

Lewis (*Mere Christianity,* 73) argues that the way morality is commonly talked about in modern times is limited and lacking in power. Increasingly, moral thought is restricted to the functioning of social relations – on the axiom "Everyone is free to do what they want as long as it doesn't hurt others". Lewis argues that thinking about practical social harmony is only superficial. What is much more essential is an internal cleansing and betterment of each individual. In the final reckoning it does not matter what sorts of social rules we have in place if individuals remain wantonly selfish, greedy and cruel. Whatever new laws are passed in attempt to improve social harmony, the morally corrupt will find ways to circumvent or pervert the laws. According to Lewis, morality needs to be relished as something innate within each individual, not just a code of proper behaviour between them. In order to make a society function well, sound laws and social rules are insufficient. Laws do not make people good. And without good people even the soundest of laws are feeble. As James Fitzjames Stephen phrased the issue: "Law cannot be better than the nation in which it exists, though it may and can protect an acknowledged moral standard, and may gradually be increased in strictness as the standard rises" (*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity,* 206).

Lewis does not stop here. He argues (*Mere Christianity*, 74) that beyond all this there is also the morality between man and his creator. We might call it metaphysical morality. Lewis points out (ibid. 74) that religion is about a series of claims which have grand practical consequences. As an example, if we are – like Christians argue – immortal beings, it should affect how we behave. Then

again, if we consider ourselves fundamentally mortal, we are equally bound to behave in a different way. The same contrast exists between those who regard themselves as simply mammals, and those who consider themselves immaterial souls. In the same vein, if a man believes that his body belongs to himself alone, he is prone to behaving towards it in a different fashion than someone who considers his body as something under God's jurisdiction.

To recount, Lewis argues that what we initially notice are social norms and laws, which in fact gain their strength and virtue from the moral character of individuals who establish them and live by them. The moral framework is finally given a sense of direction by our metaphysical beliefs.

3 Religious functionalism

In this section I will introduce religious functionalism in full. My analysis will be based on the work of two scholars in particular. Firstly, Emile Durkheim, a French social scientist of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, sometimes called the father of sociology. Secondly I discuss the work of David Sloan Wilson, a contemporary American evolutionary biologist. After interpreting the theses of these two men, I offer a section in which I will discuss two competing theories.

3.1 Durkheim and the divine society

"Everything social is religious" (*Selected Writings*, 143), argues Emile Durkheim. What he implies is that if defined widely, religion can be perceived as a concrete representation of a society's innermost essence. Religion represents what the society values, holds proper and sacred. Generally this takes place in a symbolic and subconscious fashion. (ibid. 20) The *symbolic* here should be understood as an explanation or a justification that exists on the surface, hiding a more fundamental function underneath. Instances of this phenomenon will be discussed recurrently, but an example would be the way in which the laws of Moses bind the Jews to specific dietary rules. On the symbolic level this is mainly a matter of pious submission to God's holy commandments, but the fundamental function is about social cohesion and in-group delineation. A way to separate *us* from *them*. More generally, this all goes to say that people are typically unaware of the religious or transcendental nature of their values and traditions. In the modern context this could include values such as equality, individual freedom, and human rights. Everyone is expected to agree, anyone who disagrees is a pariah and shall be excommunicated. Such sacred values are so deeply and passionately held that they are considered self-evident, not requiring any further justification.

At the heart of every society are moral rules. Rules that are in their nature both collectively and individually binding. The moral rules bind everyone individually to a shared spectrum of acceptable behaviour. Obedience is enforced, and disobedience punished. For Durkheim, morality

is ultimately a social phenomenon – collective ideals that suppress and constrain the wanton desires of the individual. It follows that as the collective, traditional value systems degrade, ever more freedom is given to the individual to fulfil his desires.

Durkheim stands in contrast to the popular utilitarian arguments where *good* is merely condensed to represent "optimization of individual satisfaction" (ibid. 3). A contemporary version of this line of thinking has been offered by the prominent New Atheist Sam Harris in his book *The Moral Landscape*:

> The world of measurement and the world of meaning must ultimately be reconciled […] As with all matters of fact, differences of opinion on moral questions merely reveal the incompleteness of our knowledge; they do not oblige us to respect a diversity of views indefinitely. (*The Moral Landscape*, 22)

Harris' thesis is founded on the notion of constructing an empirical system for measuring human well-being, and consequently resolving all moral questions using this tool. For him, *good* is a synonym for *well-being*. Durkheim considers this utilitarian approach a dead end. A society of individualists acting simply on utilitarian grounds would be no society at all, and consequently a societal approach intensely focused on the individual is not sensible. Equating *good* with *well-being* is also highly problematic. It is surely the case that many of the peaks in Harris' landscape are occupied by sadists and sociopaths. After all, exploiting others is an effective way of getting on in life. Consequently, it is questionable whether Harris' landscape actually has much to do with morality. Lewis argued that reasoned justifications cannot liberate us from an intellectual dead-end: we should be selfless simply because we should be selfless. This is a tautology that cannot be resolved through utilitarian means, because it would always be in the individual's reasonable benefit to exploit others as much as possible to increase his well-being.

Durkheim makes use of the concepts of *volume* and *intensity* regarding collective beliefs and values. By volume he means the degree to which everyone within the community shares the relevant beliefs, and by intensity the degree to which those beliefs are taken seriously and affect people's lives. The lower the volume and intensity of collective beliefs and values, the weaker and

vaguer the rules that stem from them. Generally, the more primitive the society, the stronger both the volume and the intensity. (*Selected Writings,* 5)

Durkheim argues that Christianity is the origin of the Western ethos of individual introspection and self-criticism. The relationship between God and man concerns the individual and his creator. In Christianity, the moral essence was shifted from the external to the internal. Piety is not about avoiding natural disasters and placating spirits or deities. In many respects, the modern phenomenon of secular moral individualism could well be called a "clinical" form of the Christian ethos. (ibid. 22)

Following the thinking of both Durkheim and Lewis, it is reasonable to argue that human rights constitute a good practical example of the relationship between Christianity and moral individualism. Many think that modern ideals like human rights emerged into existence as an act of rebellion against "the old world", that these ideals were a radical renunciation of what is considered a dark and immoral past. Yet it may well be argued that human rights are inconceivable without Christianity: they stand on its shoulders and are dependent on it. Part of the core teaching of Christianity is the notion of God as a father who loves each of us individually, and who fashioned each of us in his own image. No matter what our position in life is, no matter how badly we behave, we still have God's love and it can never be taken away from us. In this framework an individual's ultimate value is not dependent on any particular skill or aptitude, such as intelligence or health. Nor is it based on moral excellence or good deeds. The value is absolute and independent of the individual himself. These ideals of unearned, inalienable gifts are powerfully counterintuitive and exceptional. It is in line with Durkheim's thinking to argue that only a civilization built on Christianity – on the idea that we are undeservedly redeemed beings infinitely loved by God – could come to think of a notion like human rights.

Much of Durkheim's thinking could be condensed into one phrase: "God is society". The divine is in fact the symbolic representation of society itself – the creative capacity, force and value

of the collective. This is exemplified by what an individual may feel in a church sermon, or when taking part in a military march – a power that simultaneously transcends over him but that is also latent within him. Society is a part of you, you are a part of society. (*Selected Writings,* 26) Stripped of society man becomes a literal beast. He cannot develop a personality, morals, full cognitive skills, the essential qualities that make a human being humane. Society is what breathes in the soul and transforms the animal into a person. (ibid. 27)

Durkheim illustrates the connection between God and society still further. Society is what gives us the benefits of civilization. Language, tools, knowledge of the past generations. We feel instinctively grateful and indebted – we receive these great blessing through no effort of our own. We sense that we owe to an entity much greater than ourselves, one that was here before we arrived and will remain here after we leave. This entity created us, helps us, protects us, and assures for us our privileged position separate from the lower animals. (ibid. 232)

As all that is social is also religious, and all that is of the collective is essentially divine, we come to notice the centrality of religion in Durkheim's model. An individual can only be free through his dependence upon religion and God – or the social and the collective; in Durkheim's model these are different ways of describing the same thing. The definitions are threateningly wide, risking confusion and loss of detail. David Sloan Wilson, whose work I will discuss later, agrees with this criticism and provides a more focused and constrained model and terminology.

According to Durkheim (ibid. 214), specific religious beliefs in the supernatural are symbolic in their character. Behind them are pre-existing social sentiments which were the original reason for the emergence of the supernatural religious beliefs. These sentiments come in two forms. Firstly there are inter-personal sentiments, which occur between individuals. Included are emotions like respect, affection and fear. These feelings are present within communities on a day to day basis.

In addition, there exist the sentiments that bind the social entity as a whole, not each individual separately. These direct the way how societies interact with other societies. Hence,

Durkheim dubs them inter-social sentiments. The key sentiment here is obligation. The first group of sentiments affects our interactions with others, but does not greatly impede our independence. The second group, however, is what makes us parts of a whole. They are what give rise to our sense of social obligation. (*Selected Writings,* 220)

Furthermore, it was this second group of sentiments that, according to Durkheim, gave birth to religion. Primitive religions are tribal in their nature; gods affect the commune, not the individuals. Storms, droughts and wars are punishments targeted at the whole, not at any particular individual. This helps to explain the powerful sense of subjugation that characterises primitive religions and primitive societies. Individual behaviour is greatly restricted as the inter-social sentiments of social obligation rule when the safety of the whole is vital.

For Durkheim, the metaphysical and the supernatural are inessential when defining religion. For him, religion is about intense convictions shared by a community of people. Intense convictions will inevitably take on a religious character. They become sacred and pure, untouchable. The same reverence will be observable in all such circumstances, whether the convictions are of secular or supernatural kind.

Religious beliefs – that is to say intense, shared convictions – are what bestow any group its unity:

> A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden – beliefs and practices which unite into a single community, called a 'church', all those who adhere to them. (ibid. 224)

According to Durkheim, religion and God – understood as communal force – are means that allow people to face the world with greater confidence and increased vigour. Durkheim adds that it can make a man greater than himself, lead him to supreme heroism or horrifying barbarism. (ibid. 231) When the sympathy, esteem and respect of your community are with you, God is with you. A moral unison with a community establishes a foundation for our moral nature. One feels this moral unison as an intangible force existing outside himself, yet taking action within him – this results in a

powerful feeling of elevation. (ibid. 231) People are usually incapable of expressing or describing this experience in anything other than religious terms.

The end result of this communal force affecting a society is the emergence of a sentiment that Durkheim calls social consciousness. In order for this sense to be preserved and cultivated, it needs to be reinforced through rituals, gatherings, sermons. This applies equally to gatherings of political parties, military training, and traditional religious practices. Interaction with the moral community is what nourishes the moral consciousness and allows people to remind each other of the feeling of communal force. Without these rituals the moral sense, the social force – the support of God – weakens and withers. (*Selected Writings,* 231)

A central paradox described in Durkheim's work can be characterised in the following way: liberty of the individual can only be achieved through his dependence upon society. (ibid. 115) The collective has a liberating character. One becomes free of the blind, unthinking forces of the physical world by gaining the protection of the great, intelligent force of society. Gaining this protection requires submission and leads to dependence.

Durkheim describes the character of primitive religions as a series of rites whose goal was to ensure the regular day to day workings of the universe, to prevent abnormalities. People's attention was constantly turned outside – what is happening in nature, how can it be placated. (ibid. 239) Christianity in contrast is a highly developed and sophisticated religion where the focus is put on man himself, on his own soul. The most important aspect of life, the spiritual life, is to be found from within. The God of Christianity has to do primarily with the spiritual world. Spirit is superior to the body. What the God of Christianity wants and deserves are truth, trust, thought, respect, love, belief and faith, not physical offerings and sacrifices.

To illustrate this difference, Durkheim points out that the most important rite in Christianity is prayer, and not just as a mantra but as a form of introspection. A Christian must observe himself and his innermost feelings constantly because virtue and piety relate ultimately to the internal

workings of the soul, not obvious material acts. One's conscience must be constantly examined, there is a need to perpetually question oneself and scrutinise one's intentions. Christianity demands constant self-criticism.

Durkheim points out (*Selected Writings,* 240) that in primitive religions the most important duties do not concern other men, but are directed at gods. What is always most crucial is the careful and successful accomplishment of the necessary rites, instead of, say, helping one's neighbour. Righteous deeds are separate from general moral behaviour towards the fellow man. Impiety is worse than murder.

Christianity shifted away from this model. It was not to be a "god's religion", but a human religion. The central belief of Christianity is that God became a man and died for the salvation of humanity. The righteous and the moral become one and the same. Piety and ethics are inseparable in Christianity. Man's principal duty towards God is to love his neighbour. Offenses against general morality are offenses against God. The practical function of God is not to be the target of moral behaviour, but to be its guardian and guarantor. He ensures morality is respected.

Durkheim points out (ibid. 241) that even though Christianity gave individual thought more room and centrality than the more primitive religions, there still were and remain conflicts, particularly when man became the object of scientific research. The reaction has often been one of disgust – man has been brought low, studied simply as a natural being. It has been particularly problematic when his morality is studied as facts of nature are studied. In this respect, studying human morality as a natural phenomenon can be likened to pornography. When morality is discussed as a purely natural force, the boundary between the soul and the body, the spiritual and the material, is not being respected. The border between the sacred and the profane has been transgressed. This connects to the topic of obscenity that I will return to further on.

Durkheim argues (ibid. 243) that there will always exist a sorrowful sacrifice as a result of the act of free inquiry. The less a religion directs individual judgment the less it will influence people's

lives. The less it influences their lives, the less cohesion and vitality it can bestow on the society. The stronger the doctrine, the stronger and more unified the society. The cost of freedom is relative weakness and disunity.

Finally, Durkheim argues that religious – this time in the more specific sense of supernatural or metaphysical – and moral ideas are often fused together inseparably (*Selected Writings.* 110). The danger is that if moral education simply eliminates all that is religious from moral discipline, then all the moral elements end up weakened or discarded as well. Religion has always been the vehicle of moral ideas, and it is not easy to see where one stops and the other begins. Every time something symbolic or supernatural is removed, great care must be taken to not leave its place empty. Durkheim argues that the goal should be to express in clear and rational language the moral characteristics of religious beliefs. The concept of "rational morality" should be based on a rather superficial distinction made for the sake of clarity, not for the sake of eliminating all religious content.

To sum up, Durkheim offers us a model that explains religion and God through society and social norms. God is a symbolic representation of the collective we are a part of. Religion is a culmination of the values and beliefs that a given society holds sacred. Durkheim argues that Christianity is a particularly sophisticated religion that facilitates the development of sophisticated societies with a sophisticated sense of morality. Individual freedom and societal strength are in constant conflict. As individuals become more liberated, societies weaken. Serious attention should be paid to the connection between the content and the container – morality and religion. Durkheim's wide definitions are what make his thesis so compelling, but they also cause problems concerning accuracy and detail. Consequently, the more detail-oriented and generally somewhat less adventurous model offered in the next section should now prove particularly useful.

3.2 Adaptivity – functionalism detailed

David Sloan Wilson, like Durkheim, advocates a functionalist approach to religion. Much of his thinking is similar in principle to Durkheim's previous work, but Wilson combines it with evolutionary biology. According to Wilson's thesis, presented in his book *Darwin's Cathedral*, religion is functional in very much the same fashion as a biological adaptation is functional.

As Durkheim had already argued before, it is inconceivable that religion's core function could be to describe reality. This would lead to perpetual disappointment, without any counteracting benefit. Religions as they exist would quickly die out. Belief structures which could not deliver some practical, measurable benefit, would be discarded in favour of more adaptive beliefs. (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 53–54)

Instead of representing reality, religion's purpose is to organise social life. This function can be called its secular utility. From an evolutionary perspective, religion is an adaptation that allows human groups to function as effective, co-operative entities.

After Durkheim's time functionalism lost its popularity and became largely rejected in the social sciences. For Durkheim it had been essential that the whole must be more than the sum of its parts. The new incoming trend of reductionism renounced this view. The core of the reductionist idea is that society ultimately boils down to individuals who can be analysed separately. Individualism began to reign supreme – groups were simply a by-product of what individuals do to each other. In many respects this still describes the current intellectual and cultural climate quite well. In general, individualism remains the dominant trend in Western culture.

Wilson argues that the emerging, more holistic view is much superior to reductionism (ibid. 66). He compares the holistic approach to the relationship between a lump of clay and a sculptor. The parts inform and restrict the whole, but do not determine its properties. The size and quality of a lump of clay set strict limits to the sculptor, but within those parameters countless possibilities remain open. The situation is the same with individuals and groups.

Looked at from a wider perspective, there have been at least two other major obstacles in functionalism's way. Firstly, in evolutionary biology there has been intense opposition to the idea of multi-level selection, or selection both of individuals and of groups, particularly in the case of humans. Additionally, there has been resistance on part of social scientists towards an evolutionary approach to analysing human behaviour. These obstacles have both lead to the restricted application of functionalism to only non-human species. A turtle's shell has been an acceptable target for a functionalist, adaptive explanation – it exists to protect the animal from predators. However, applying the same thinking to human qualities and practices has been widely scorned, such as in arguing that religion exists to allow us to work as effective groups and social units.

These sorts of functionalist arguments, presented both by biologists in evolutionary biology, and by the social scientists following Durkheim's footsteps, have been criticised as "just so stories", alluding to Kipling's children's tales. They are post-factual and represent ad-hoc reasoning, many would argue. Wilson admits (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 69) that a functionalist or adaptive hypothesis can be difficult to test, but not necessarily any more difficult than a hypothesis founded on some other principles.

When discussing religion specifically, the rivals of functionalism have been manifold. Religion has been characterised as a tool of exploitation, a cultural parasite, a by-product of individual cost-benefit analysis, and so forth. Functionalists argue, however, that a thriving religion does not thrive arbitrarily. There are reasons why it succeeds while competition fails. It needs to offer more secular utility than the competitors. Furthermore, even features which appear to have no purpose may in fact have latent functions. The goal of religious functionalism has been to shed light on these hidden mechanisms (ibid. 82). Wilson argues (ibid. 83) that ultimately functionalism was never falsified, it simply became unfashionable. He is also of the view that there is good reason to believe that it may experience a resurgence. This is because functionalism is built on evolutionary

biology, and as evolutionary biology advances, functionalism in the social sciences will advance concurrently.

As mentioned, a key notion is that religion serves many covert purposes without even its adherents being aware of it. Religion, like many social institutions and traditions more generally, even necessitates a lack of awareness. This is in line with the conservative model described above. Wilson argues (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 77) that the more one participates in a group-mental process, the less likely they are to be consciously aware of their participation. Holding on to traditions and observing rituals are things people often do without being able to articulate or clearly rationalise why that is. Yet if these costly practices carried no benefit, they would have been discarded in favour of more adaptive beliefs or practices. The challenge is to look beyond the symbolic and see the secular utility behind it. Examples outside religion include institutions like money and property rights. They gain their strength from people unconsciously believing in their worth and legitimacy. A piece of paper becomes powerful when everyone acts as if it is powerful. The note is only a symbol, a vehicle for the actual value that it carries. Edmund Burke argues memorably concerning the general benefits of irrational prejudice and the harmfulness of cold reason:

> We are afraid to put men to live and trade each on his own private stock of reason; because we suspect that this stock in each man is small, and that the individuals would be better to avail themselves of the general bank and capital of nations, and of ages. Many of our men of speculation, instead of exploding general prejudices, employ their sagacity to discover the latent wisdom which prevails in them… it [is] more wise to continue the prejudice, with the reason involved, than to cast away the coat of prejudice, and to leave nothing but the naked reason; because prejudice, with its reason, has a motive to give action to that reason, and an affection which will give it permanence. Prejudice renders a man's virtue his habit; and not a series of unconnected acts. Through just prejudice, his duty becomes a part of his nature. (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 107)

Burke takes a pessimistic view on the capacities of the individual. We gain our strength and virtue from the collective inheritance imparted by past generations. An important part of this inheritance is prejudice – instinctive views, opinions, attitudes – which we do not devise ourselves, but are socialised into through becoming a link in the generational chain. Burke argues that it is the

academic's responsibility to apply his reason to these inherited prejudices, and examine them with a sense of respect. The purpose of the examination is not to defame or to discredit a prejudice, but to come to understand it. The premise ought not to be "Why might this prejudice be unjustified?", but "Why might this prejudice be wise?" The past generations are given the benefit of the doubt. The inheritance they leave us is expected not to be harmful or arbitrary. As a rule it is presumed that we inherit particular prejudices because there is wisdom in them. Furthermore, Burke argues that examined prejudice fills our actions with serenity and sincerity. Behaviour is no longer based on a tenuous intellectual justification, but on ingrained virtue. Prejudice gives stability and reliability to human interactions. We no longer ask "Why should we be good to one another even at our own expense?", as we have become prejudiced to being good. Virtue has become our unconscious habit and as such it requires no justification.

Roger Scruton argues that even attempting to justify a prejudice through individual reasoning is foolish, because it will simply lead to the destruction of the prejudice:

> Replacing them [prejudices] with the abstract rational systems of the philosophers, we may think ourselves more rational and better equipped for life in the modern world. But in fact we are less well equipped, and our new beliefs are far less justified, for the very reason that they are justified by ourselves. The real justification for a prejudice is the one that justifies it *as* a prejudice, rather than as a rational conclusion of an argument. ("How I Became a Conservative", 12)

According to Scruton, the justifications of a prejudice cannot be understood from the first person perspective, but they have to be observed from the outside, like an anthropologist studying the rituals of some strange tribe. Scruton uses the example of sexual relations, a topic which will be discussed recurrently in this paper. Chivalry for men and modesty for women constitute prejudices which, until recently, were generally accepted. There are solid anthropological explanations as to why it has been wise to manage sexual relations in this way – to increase the stability of the society, for instance. Yet the actual reason why men tried their best to be gallant and women chaste had nothing to do with anthropological reasoning. Scruton argues that outrage, honour, and shame were what motivated people into this line behaviour. Prejudice was what guided them. Now, sexual

liberators have had no difficulty in showing that these prejudices are utterly irrational from the point of view of the individual. The individual has no direct access to the justifications behind his prejudices, since at best the motives are collective and apply to the society as a whole, not to each individual separately. Sexual liberators offer to replace this prejudiced model with a new, transparently rational objective: sexual pleasure. Should that be the accepted goal, chivalry and chastity are indeed utterly unjustifiable.

The thesis of religious functionalism is that common to virtually all religions – no matter how successful they end up – is their underlying purpose. Religions exist mainly to allow us to achieve together what would be impossible alone. Something that demands such a heavy investment in terms of time, energy and thought, could not exist if it did not offer secular utility. In order to facilitate this secular utility, impenetrable supernatural beliefs and practices are required. This is what makes religions so powerful for their followers, yet so perplexing to the onlookers outside.

Wilson notes (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 99) that there are at least five essential things an adaptive, functionalist belief-system needs to account for. Firstly, the system must be able to cope with ignorance towards the justification of its norms. This may relate to the topic of prejudice discussed above. Or it may be thatthe long term and short term effects of obeying a command are in conflict. Wilson uses the analogy of eating spinach. A child can be told to eat spinach because it is good for his health in the long term, but the immediate effect in the mouth is a disagreeable taste. The child is ignorant of what is good for him, ignorant of the high value of good health. The prevailing order needs to be able to counteract the instinctive revolt.

Secondly, the system must be able to deal with cheating. The purpose of adaptive, functionalist belief-systems is to fuse individuals into a unified entity. Cheating works directly against this primary goal, and is particularly effective among sincere fellows who are trying to act as selflessly as they can. Personal benefit of the individuals constituting the group cannot be an organising principle for any successful social system, because it is always in each individual's

personal benefit to cheat and abuse the rules. Individual benefit and social order are in constant conflict.

Thirdly, the system must be economical – easily understood and easily put into practice with effective results. As Wilson describes the case, "A fictional belief system that is user-friendly and that motivates an adaptive suite of behaviours will surpass a realistic belief system that requires a Ph.D. to understand and that leads to a paralysis of indecision." (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 99)

Fourthly, a fictional belief system can be much more effective – can provide more intense motivation – than a realistic one. For instance, regarding one's enemies as inhuman beasts will be significantly more effective in the cause of winning a war, than believing that the enemy is just as human as oneself.

Finally, a fictional belief system has the further benefit of being able to perform the same functions as an external reward and punishment system could, but does so at a drastically reduced cost. Instead of having to establish increasingly heavy-handed and expensive systems of police and secular law, a fictional belief system can induce a strong sense of self-policing and self-restraint unattainable through more realistic means. Internalised social control (fear of God) is much more affordable than external social control (fear of the police).

These five reasons should lead us to expect that most adaptive belief systems should be fictional in character, because of the benefits that only a fictional belief system can offer. As Wilson emphasises (ibid. 100), a belief system's adaptedness or functionality must be assessed based on the behaviour it motivates and causes, not by how accurately it corresponds with reality. Whether its teachings are true in the epistemological sense is irrelevant.

To recount, Wilson argues that albeit vigorously challenged, functionalism has never been falsified and in fact it may be going through a resurgence. Wilson outlines five key features that are a functionalist belief system must account for, and points out the sub-conscious character of all shared, social belief systems. In this he echoes the general conservative analysis of religion. Finally,

the principal argument of functionalism to keep firmly in mind is that the purpose of religion is to organise social life, not to describe reality.

3.2.1 Historical examples

The two examples described in this section – early Christianity and Judaism – are both stories of adaptive success. However, it is important to keep in mind that in the mechanics of selection there are always failures for every success story. Not all religions prove adaptive, or at least adaptive enough to survive competition against more functional rivals. Even a successful religion may gradually lose its adaptive features through a kind of cultural erosion, or the once adaptive features may become ineffective or even maladaptive as the environment changes.

3.2.1.1 Early Christianity

Emerging Christianity was revolutionary in being able to retain much the preceding Jewish moral essence, while opening the system up for newcomers. Anyone was welcomed to join, regardless of their background:

> **26**For ye are all the children of God by faith in Christ Jesus. **27**For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. **28**There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus. **29**And if ye *be* Christ's, then are ye Abraham's seed, and heirs according to the promise. (Galatians 3:26–29)

Membership was lax, but morality was not. The moral rules that bound each convert were strict, as had been the rules binding Jews. “Anyone could become a Christian, but those who did were expected to overhaul their behaviours under the direction of a single God in a close-knit community that could easily enforce the new norms.” (*Darwin’s Cathedral,* 151)

Many of the new moral norms introduced by Christianity were much more adaptive, as in functionally useful, than the prevailing norms in the Roman Empire. Prime among them was sexual morality. As Wilson points out (ibid. 151), Romans did not procreate even though they had the necessary resources. Boys were much preferred to girls and infanticide, particularly of girls, was common. It has been estimated that in Rome there were between 131 and 140 men for every 100

women. This lead to social calamity. Status had grown paramount, family secondary. Men in large numbers did not see any great benefit in dedicating time or care to their wives and families, and instead chased social status. The Romans of course had a sex drive, but they had found numerous ways of fulfilling it in a manner that did not lead to procreation. Homosexuality was commonplace, as were all manner of non-reproductive heterosexual practices. If a woman happened to get pregnant after all, abortion was a common reaction.

Even though the Roman leaders, Julius Caesar among them (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 152), tried to institute policies in order to encourage families to have at least three children each, all such attempts were "pathetically impotent", as Robert Stark (*Rise of Christianity*, 108) puts it. The cultural and moral ethos of the land was not at all conducive to family life. Even after taking into account the constant influx of barbarian settlers, the Roman population had begun to decline when Christianity began to emerge.

Here the contrast becomes quite striking. Christianity, like Judaism, emphasised marriage above all other social institutions and expected abundant children as a result of marital fidelity. Abortion, infanticide and non-reproductive sexual acts were strictly forbidden as sinful. Where the Roman law had repeatedly failed, the Christian faith succeeded. Christian women had far more babies than their pagan sisters.

In addition to being more pro-procreation in terms of its teaching and moral system, early Christianity was much more attractive to pagan women than other religions of their time. Wilson points out (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 152) that women of all ranks, but particularly in the upper ranks of society, were eager to join the Christian church. So not only did Christian women have more children than pagan women, the Christian society itself had more women in it than the pagan one surrounding it. One of the main reasons for Christianity's growth was in the emphasis put onto procreation in contrast to a surrounding society that had forgotten the art.

Ara Norenzayan (*Big Gods,* 192) points out that this is a particular strength of religion as much today as it was in ancient times. The more irreligious and secular the society, the less children its members have. This is a universal trend. Secular societies today may have higher economic prosperity, and the people are exposed to science and education to an unprecedented degree. But these advantages mean nothing in the long run, if the secular societies are consistently outbred by the religious ones. As Norenzayan, emphasises, lack of longevity and relatively weak cultural tenacity may well be the secular society's downfall. This runs in conjunction with the individualistic cultural mindset, whose consequence is that the secular society becomes decreasingly organismic and its cohesion dwindles.

Another moral revolution had to do with the Christian notion of charity:

> **35**For I was an hungred, and ye gave me meat: I was thirsty, and ye gave me drink: I was a stranger, and ye took me in: **36**Naked, and ye clothed me: I was sick, and ye visited me: I was in prison, and ye came unto me. …. **40**Verily I say unto you, Inasmuch as ye have done *it* unto one of the least of these my brethren, ye have done *it* unto me. (Matthew 25:35– 40)

Wilson notes (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 154) how the Christian society developed into a small-scale welfare state within an empire that did not have any real social services. Furthermore, there was powerful selection pressure supporting this adaptive change in morals.

Rome was riddled with plagues. The normal pagan reaction was to escape, hide, and avoid all contact with the sick. The festering corpses would rot on the streets, spreading disease further when no one could even be paid to remove them. Christians, meanwhile, utilised their faith in a way that made possible what had been impossible. Christians were more than willing to take care of the sick, even at great risk to themselves. At the same time the pagans would leave the infected to fend for themselves. The simple acts of giving the ill water and shelter were able to decrease mortality rates remarkably among the Christians. To put it simply, due to the contents of their faith the early Christians were more resilient to natural disasters like plagues. It should be noted that being

altruistic towards one's fellow man is made much easier and more logical for the believer, when the whole religion hinges on the ultimate altruistic sacrifice of its central figure.

In a Rome filled with disease, calamity, conflict and the ever looming threat of sudden death, Christianity offered a further advantage over paganism, and even Judaism – the powerful thought of an afterlife. Afterlife in the polytheistic system of the Romans was no great consolation, and even among Jews afterlife is quite secondary, most of the focus being set on building the nation of Israel in the here and now. As W.H. McNeill (*Plagues and Peoples*, 108) puts it:

> Another advantage Christians enjoyed over pagans was that the teachings of their faith made life meaningful even amid sudden and surprising death…. Even a shattered remnant of survivors who had somehow made it through war or pestilence or both could find warm, immediate and healing consolation in the vision of a heavenly existence for those missing relatives and friends…. Christianity was, therefore, a system of thought and feeling thoroughly adapted to a time of troubles in which hardship, disease, and violent death commonly prevailed.

Not only did this belief relieve stress and help people to move on with their lives, it also helped to motivate and facilitate the deep altruism that was required in taking care of the plague-ridden masses, not to speak of other similar circumstances of great charity, where one's own life needed to be risked for a greater social good.

Of course, as Wilson notes (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 156), the dual nature of morality was still present – even if in a more diluted form. The early Christians did indeed take care of the poor and the sick even if they were pagans, but not to the same extent and dedication as with fellow Christians. Additionally, the reasons for helping pagans were not purely selfless, since charity made pagans more likely to convert. Furthermore, in order to prevent cheaters and free-riders, joining the church required expensive commitments.

Even though anyone – be they a prostitute or a gentile, poor or criminal – could join the Christian church and have their past sins forgiven, this did not mean that the sinful behaviour would be allowed to persist. Forgiveness was conditioned on the promise of change on part of the

wrongdoer. Should the sinful behaviour continue, the punishment would be expulsion: “Purge the evil person from among you.” (1 Corinthians 5:13)

Conditional forgiveness is essential for the successful co-operation of any group. Forgiveness is required, but needs to be restricted to prevent and mitigate the exploitation of sincere altruism. That the different aspects of forgiveness – sometimes extremely altruistic, at others very strictly conditioned – are all present in Christian tradition is a result of functionalism, adaptation (*Darwin’s Cathedral,* 215). The environment in which Christianity has operated through the centuries has been ever-changing. In a particular circumstance, for a particular audience, from a particular point of view, the interpretation and emphasis will have adapted and changed.

Wilson points out (ibid. 215) that no organism, whether social or biological, can ever be fully adaptive, fully functional. There are always going to be maladaptive or non-adaptive features, sometimes as a necessary price of the adaptive ones, sometimes as a consequence of changes in the surrounding environment. One double-edged feature is the canonization of the Bible. It was vital in order to retain any sense of unity and cohesion within the church, but came at a cost. Before canonization, Christianity had been very flexible – all manner of symbolism and argumentation could be freely developed to answer any particular challenges posed by the cultural or social environment.

After canonization the faith became locked down to the chosen scriptures, and the interpretations they allowed. As an example, even though the contemptuous attitude toward Judaism was an adaptive feature in the early days of the Christian faith when orthodox-Judaism was its greatest enemy, this feature later became needless, but ineradicable due to canonization. This in part led to millennia of non-adaptive anti-Semitism.

To sum up, Christianity revolutionised the pagan world. Firstly, there was the sexual revolution where Christian sexual morality began to gain influence and family life grew in importance. In addition, Christianity encouraged selfless behaviour, for which there was a clear

theological imperative. Christianity proved useful in stabilising plummeting demographics, and at the same time it strengthened the society through the *volume* and *intensity* of its values, to put it in Durkheimian terms. Yet despite the strength of its values, Christianity was remarkably open and inclusive, not just a religion for a particular ethnic group, but a religion for all.

3.2.1.2 Judaism

In Christianity the practical dimension of religion can be at times difficult to perceive. Judaism is a much clearer case, since it is a religion explicitly based on laws which in a very obvious fashion affect the everyday behaviour of believers.

As Wilson notes (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 133), God gave the people of Israel different types of laws. Some were about in-group behaviour, how the Jews should treat each other. Others decreed how Jews should behave towards God. Additionally, there were laws that dealt with how Jews should behave in relation to other peoples. The first type of law aligns fairly well with the modern Judeo-Christian values, charity prime among them. Then again, God instructs his chosen to put to the sword a number of competing tribes. Wilson points out (ibid. 135) that at the time the Jews were a warrior people to whom a god of war was of functional use – a pacifist god who forbids war is not the sort of god that a warrior people have any use for. It is even arguable that a pacifist god would have led the Jews to their destruction in the violent, tribal setting that they found themselves in thousands of years ago.

Many have had great difficulty accepting the resulting moral and behavioural duality – treating your own people in one way, and outsiders in another way. They would deem it hypocritical, call it a toxic double-standard. As Wilson notes (ibid. 135), this reaction arises from the incredibly modern point of view that places all humans under a single, vast moral umbrella. This, however, is not the way how virtually every community in history has perceived the world. Understanding religion through the ideal of "universal human brotherhood" will not work, because such a view is a latecomer in our biological and cultural development. The adaptionist, functionalist

model that Wilson advocates is one that can explain and account for the moral duality, instead of simply reacting with puzzled outrage.

Wilson points out (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 136) that while tribalism is common to religions generally, Judaism has many peculiarities that other religions do not share. Generally religions tend to disperse and disappear as time passes. Judaism, however, has survived for thousands of years against the harshest of imaginable odds. Judaism has been a non-proselytising religion (i.e. it does not seek to convert new believers to swell its ranks) of a dispersed people who did not have a land to call their own, while facing perpetual persecution from the mainstream wherever they went. Along the millennia Judaism was not protected by insuperable strength of arms, nor geographical isolation. What is it then that facilitated this incredible tenacity?

An important part of the explanation is self-inflicted social isolation. The isolation of Jews is not merely the result of anti-Semitism, but a mechanism embedded to the religion itself. The principle explained by Wilson (ibid. 136) is that a minority religion becomes durable by isolating its followers from the surrounding society and restricting acceptable co-operation to within the group. The laws of Moses include a large number of ways in which the Jews are to separate themselves from all other peoples – circumcision, clothing, dietary rules, sexual rules, and so forth. The situation with Moslem immigrants forming isolated enclaves within Western societies is an example of this same principle.

A second important point (ibid. 139) is the remarkable genetic kinship that the Jews share with each other. This is of course linked to the aforementioned self-inflicted isolation; genetic cohesion of a migrant people would be impossible to maintain for millennia without strict policies of isolation. Kinship is, in light of evolutionary theory, a powerful source of altruism, which leads to an increased capacity for co-operation and harmony within the group. Usually religions have to engender a sense of brotherhood artificially, but Judaism had no such need as it could build on

actual blood relations. Mounting high genetic relatedness atop of a unified moral system will result in an exceptionally co-operative group.

As Wilson points out (ibid. 140), the remarkable level of co-operation and cohesion in Jewish communities is exemplified by the relative absence of crime, poverty, substance abuse, and other social problems within them. The economist Thomas Sowell has argued (*Ethnic America*, 94) that there is something special about the Jewish way of life, special enough to violate all expectations:

> Even when the Jews lived in the slums, they were slums with a difference – lower alcoholism, homicide, accidental death rates than other slums, or even the city as a whole. Their children had lower truancy rates, lower juvenile delinquency rates, and (by the 1930s) higher IQ's than other children …. There was also more voting for congressmen by low income Jews than even by higher income Protestants or Catholics…. Despite a voluminous literature claiming that slums shape people's values, the Jews had their own values, and they took those values into and out of the slums. (*Ethnic America*, 94)

Here described is the benevolent side of the above mentioned dual nature of a strong moral system that facilitates the unity of a group. Wilson points out (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 141) that given their circumstances under constant persecution, the Jews did not have very many opportunities to exploit others – they were normally the targets of exploitation. However, when an opportunity presented itself, the Jews were ready act based on an instrumental attitude towards outsiders. Often this took the form of forming a pact with one group of gentiles against another, usually an alliance with the elite against the peasantry (ibid. 142). The elites would then do their best to protect the Jews from the rest of the angered gentile population. The Jewry were also able to gain resources and influence through a financial double-standard, where lending money with interest to a fellow Jew was forbidden, but lending money with interest to a gentile was actively mandated.

The relationships between groups are in their nature amoral and competitive, whereas the relationships within the group are moral and co-operative. In the case of the Jews this meant that they persevered, grew, and prospered making use of their powerful internal cohesion and co-operation. This was coupled with the calculated, instrumental exploitation of gentiles wherever

suitable. Yet the Jewry were repeatedly brought low by persecution in a variety of forms by outside groups – often motivated by the very things that made the Jews so strong and enduring: their isolationism and unwillingness to assimilate. Wilson points out that on the flipside "[a]ssimilated Jews quickly fall prey to the ills of the surrounding society." (141) The high walls surrounding the Jewish way of life made their rise to prosperity possible, but made them appear threatening to outsiders.

To recount, Judaism is an ideology defying all odds, surviving while facing centuries of persecution. It is also an apt example of the tribal aspects of religion, the double standard that exists between the in-group and the out-group. Furthermore, the Jewish way of life includes a remarkable set of features that greatly increase the degree of in-group cohesion. These include genetic – rather than merely metaphorical – kinship, and an intricate law-based religious system.

3.2.2 The factual and the practical

Wilson points out (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 220) that the word *religion* derives from the Latin word *religio*, which means "to unite or bind together". However, ideologies, political views, sports teams, military organizations, etc., are also capable of binding people together. Wilson argues that from the special case of religion we can extrapolate a more general rule-set for other systems that unite us. Following Wilson's view Durkheim's definition of religion was somewhat too broad to be exact and useful enough. Arguing that religion is based only on the dichotomy of the sacred and the profane, or that it is simply another way of describing the values of a society, risks losing sight of important details, as well as being confusing. In normal language use regarding the flag of one's country sacred does not constitute anything religious. Then again, defining religion based solely on the notion of supernatural agents is both narrow and shallow. For instance Buddhism, even though it may in practice include many supernatural beliefs, is not focused on the supernatural.

Nevertheless, the similarities between religion and all other binding systems, like political parties and nation states, are still quite real. Wilson argues (ibid. 244) that the similarities may have

become more difficult to perceive after the general secularization of the West. We are used to seeing religion as something separate and unique in contrast to all the secular moral and social systems of which we are a part. This split has made it made it more difficult for us to appreciate the functional nature of religion in the same way that we appreciate the functionality of other social or moral systems.

As Wilson points out (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 228), the non-religious often hold contempt for religion as a sign of mental weakness – people must be hopelessly stupid to believe in fairytales without any genuine evidence, non-believers often exclaim. Religious people are considered detached from reality. Wilson has several problems with a stance like this. First of all, it cheapens and degrades the crucially important issues that intellectuals and academics should be discussing without flippancy.

Secondly, as we have been discussing, religion is not at all detached from reality, but offers numerous tangible, real-world benefits for its followers. Religion is functional, its attachment to reality is clear. To clarify the situation, Wilson argues (*Darwin's Cathedral.* 228) that there exists not only *factual realism*, but also *practical realism*. Even though religion is often not attached to reality in the factual sense – as in offering a literal, accurate explanation or description of phenomena – it is attached in the practical sense, by motivating adaptive behaviour.

Wilson uses (ibid. 228) the illuminating analogy of an atheist history professor, who is aware of all the research concerning the historical character of Jesus, but whose personal life is in a depressing turmoil as a result of the beliefs and practices he has adopted (say, wanton hedonism, nihilism, extreme individualism). The described professor is perfectly attached to reality in the factual sense, but utterly detached from it in the practical sense. The reverse could be true with a fundamentalist Christian whose life is full of purpose, who is part of a strong family unit, yet believes the world is only 6000 years old. Which, then, is more important in the lives of people – factual or practical attachment to reality?

Evolutionary theory offers another useful point of view. In concordance with the general conservative tradition of thought, Wilson argues (ibid. 228) that rationality is not the Gold Standard against which all other forms of thought are to be evaluated – when it comes to religion, adaptiveness is the real standard. The rational and the truthful may sometimes be considered maladaptive. Is it rational to avoid eating pork due to kosher rules, particularly in a time and place where food may already be sparse? Probably not, though the answer depends on how far one is willing to expand the definition of rationality. Yet pork is not really the issue, neither is the eating. What matters is the existence of rules and traditions that bind people together. The particular content of these rules can often be quite senseless and arbitrary, even demanding painful sacrifices. A form of behaviour can be utterly senseless in the proximate sense, but offer utility in an ultimate sense:

> If there is a trade-off between the two forms of realism, such that our beliefs can become more adaptive only by becoming less true, then factual realism will be the loser every time. To paraphrase evolutionary psychologists, factual realists detached from practical reality were not among our ancestors. It is the person who elevates factual truth above practical truth who must be accused of mental weakness from an evolutionary perspective. (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 228)

Furthermore, behind the argument against religion previously described is the implication that nonreligious systems of belief are categorically more factual than the religious ones. However, as Wilson points out (ibid. 229), this is not the case: history being written by the winners, intellectual and scientific theories being motivated by some purpose-driven agenda. It is evident that bending the truth to suit our purposes can and will cause problems. However, I agree with Wilson in that the truth-bending and the resulting problems are not at all limited to the realm of religion, but are a virtually universal facet of all human endeavours. There are different ways that the truth can be bent – some noble, others ignoble. I will return to this discussion in the concluding section.

Wilson reminds us (ibid. 229) that evolution and adaptation are always about trade-offs. This is also the relationship between factual and practical realism. In many cases accurate, factual knowledge is essential, but it will often prove insufficient in motivating adaptive practices.

Sometimes a symbolic belief system that is very far removed from factual realism will provide much better adaptive results. As a mental task, constructing highly motivating symbolic systems is very different from accumulating factual knowledge, yet we as individuals and as societies have to be capable of both even though the goals are often contradictory. A central task for social science is to find out how this trade-off between factual and practical realism is handled in different societies, and to find out whether there are ways to improve the process.

To sum up, Wilson establishes a difference between factual and practical realism, with religion being characterised by the latter. From an evolutionary point of view, adaptive beliefs win whether they are factual or not. This more holistic position is in line with the conservative critique of rationalism – the idea that reason alone should be considered the Gold Standard against which all thought is measured.

3.2.3 Paradoxical altruism

As Wilson notes (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 162), the functionalist approach faces tough competition from rival theories. Many would argue that religion is in its essence dysfunctional, a cultural parasite that makes people enjoy their actual lives less while focusing on the vain notion of an everlasting afterlife. Perhaps religion just impoverishes its followers, giving in return only false-consolation and some vague stress relief. That religion demands much from its followers is obvious: abstinence and self-restraint in many forms, charitable giving, adoption of strange beliefs, and so on.

At this point functionalists would point out that altruism always demands sacrifice. When the social benefits of this self-abnegating behaviour remain largely within the religious community that practices them, the net effect – even on the individual level – will be positive. If every member of the community is committed to the same selfless, altruistic behaviour, the game becomes one of non-zero-sums.

It is somewhat ironic that religious people are often the first to deny any functional benefits of their faith. As Wilson puts it (ibid. 176): "Altruism is psychologically paradoxical." Those who are most selfless end up most prosperous, as long as they live among the like-minded. You gain personally by running away from personal gain. When one's motives center around selflessness, making the welfare of others one's purpose in life, it often becomes difficult to accept the notion of one's personal prosperity also increasing in the process. The individual believer's measurable rise in prosperity runs counter to the psychological and moral underpinnings that make the increase possible in the first place.

As Wilson notes (*Darwin's Cathedral,* 176), loving and serving a perfect God will be more emotionally satisfying and motivating than loving and serving an annoying neighbour. The ultimate function is that you end up serving and loving your imperfect neighbour as a result of your love for a perfect God. Many people would not be willing to commit to the functional utility of selflessness without the metaphysical superstructure that surrounds it.

The same is true in regard to romantic love. Lovers would not tend to agree if told that their love is all about survival prospects and reproduction. The psychology comes before the utility. The practical benefits in terms of reproductive success and survivability cannot be so reliably tapped without the ideals, satisfactions and consolations of romantic love that hover above. Edmund Burke warned against rationalising into oblivion the beautiful and consoling things in life:

> It is not easily conceived what use funeral ceremonies... are to mankind. Trifling as they may seem, they nourish humanity, they soften in some measure the rigor of Death, and they inspire humble, sober, and becoming thought. They throw a decent Veil over the weak and dishonourable circumstances of our Nature. What shall we say to that philosophy, that would strip it naked? Of such sort is the wisdom of those who talk of the Love, the sentiment, and the thousand little dalliances that pass between the Sexes, in the gross way of mere procreation. They value themselves as having made a mighty discovery; and turn all pretences to delicacy into ridicule. (*A Note-Book of Edmund Burke*, 91)

According to Roger Scruton, conservative philosophy generally attempts to give people a home; a place where they feel they belong, can feel secure, and breathe easy. Scruton describes his

own philosophy as one of "Consoling thoughts for a happy and fulfilling life." (*The Roger Scruton Reader*, xxiii) This approach is characteristic of Burke as well, as is evident in the above quotation. He argues that the beautiful and the consoling should not be allowed to fall victim to the rational and the useful. Our nature may often prove crude, but the crudity can always be mitigated by something more palatable. A funeral ceremony is an apt example. It is a veil of beauty to cover it all – not to ignore death, but to make it something dignified, honourable, even beautiful. Extant already in Burke's time was the notion of alienating people from all their consolations. It was about taking apart the familiar and the hopeful, stripping away the beautiful and the sacred, claiming it is all inauthentic. Sexual relations become a banal pastime, funerals an absurd waste of time. Tearing down the beautiful veiling is quite easy, laying it anew much more troublesome.

This whole discussion can also be phrased in terms of proximate and ultimate causation (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 188). Following this approach, in the ultimate sense what is important are matters like social cohesion, reproduction and survival. However, what drive us towards those ultimate goals are proximate reasons. There are reasons like romantic love, and faith in God. Hunger exists so that we would eat; love exists so that we would procreate: faith exists so that we would co-operate.

The concept of proximate reasons bears close resemblance to prejudice. In fact, the whole discussion on the functioning of altruism can be summarised by reminding ourselves of topic of prejudice. According to Burkean philosophy, there is no individually justifiable reason for why anyone should behave well even at personal cost. From the first person perspective it is always more sensible to exploit others as much as possible. The possible justifications of altruism, just like those of chivalry and modesty discussed above, are never directly accessible to the individual, since they relate to the society as a whole. The ultimate anthropological goals do not motivate the individual – he does not love because he wants to procreate, he wants to procreate because he loves. Attempting to apply rational justifications to altruism on the level of the individual will lead to its

abolishment. Instead of rational justifications the individual has to rely on prejudice and the feelings of honour, shame, and outrage which fuel it.

4 Opposing views

The current cultural climate is rife with assault against religion and with those willing to deny religion's usefulness. To mention a prominent example, the late Christopher Hitchens, famous journalist, polemicist and New Atheist, argues that religion is patently harmful and clearly a negative force in the world:

> Religion has run out of justifications. Thanks to the telescope and the microscope, it no longer offers an explanation of anything important. Where once it used to be able, by its total command of a worldview, to *prevent* the emergence of rivals, it can now only impede and retard – or try to turn back – the measurable advances that we have made. (*God Is Not Great*, 282)

Hitchens' thesis is remarkably all-inclusive. In the course of his book (*God is Not Great: How Religion Poisons Everything*) not only does he condemn all religions equally, he objects to the character of religion in a fashion similar to carpet bombing. Religion appears contemptible on aesthetic, moral, rational, historical and philosophical grounds – at the very least. I think, however, that despite the wide scope, Hitchens fails to fully tackle the question of religion's function, relating to co-operation and social cohesion. This may be due to his ideological premises. Hitchens is very much a rationalist and a passionate advocate for individual liberty. His ideological position either denounces or ignores the conservative ethos concerning the benefits of restriction, and the critique of the worship of reason.

Because of these reasons, Hitchens is not a particularly apt opponent to religious functionalism. In order to point out more specific challengers to my chosen approach, I will discuss two alternative approaches to the analysis of religion that directly conflict with functionalism. In the following theories the functionality of religion is either greatly diminished or altogether denied. Through this discussion I attempt to further illustrate why it is that I have chosen this specific approach out of the available alternatives.

4.1 Religion as a by-product

J. Anderson Thomson, like David Sloan Wilson, is an evolutionist. Thomson attempts to illustrate the nature of religion through evolutionary psychology and neuroscience. He endeavors to explain how religion works in our minds, why we are so prone to it, and why it conforms to certain patterns. His approach should provide a useful point of contrast to the functionalist theory we have been discussing thus far.

In his book *Why we believe in god(s)* (31) Thomson advocates a so called by-product theory of religion. Religion itself is not adaptive, but the psychological structures related to it are. Religion may even exploit the underlying beneficial psychological forces as a kind of parasite. The corollary is that we can in principle gain the relevant benefits while cutting out the surrounding religious system. According to Thomson (ibid. 109), being a by-product does not diminish religion's power. He compares the situation to music, reading and writing, which are all by-products of other mechanisms of the brain, yet still incredibly influential.

A key notion in Thomson's thesis is that of craving (ibid. 41). We crave for religion in the same way we crave for food high in sugar, fat and salt. For our ancestors an ever present desire for salt, fat and sugar represented adaptive behaviour. They could never get too much of any, and were always in danger of getting too little of all. In the modern world we are subjected to practically limitless quantities of sweets and fast-food, which have proven non-adaptive and are something our ancestors never had to face. Following our adaptive desires for fat, sugar and salt in an environment where all of them are extremely plentiful will produce non-adaptive results. According to Thomson, religion follows a similar logic. It is based on our primitive, originally adaptive cravings, but fulfills them in an unstable fashion quite similar to fast-food.

To provide a further example, craving for a caretaker (ibid. 42) is highly adaptive in principle. It is a craving that lets us survive as children. We have an innate desire for attachment. According to Thomson, this attachment is at its core related to the relationship between parents and children, but

functions also in relationships between lovers and in relationships between friends. Religion, in turn, exploits the originally adaptive desire for a caretaker, and offers us an eternal father figure who will take care of us even after our actual parents are incapable of doing so. Not only is this new parent powerful, he is all-powerful. He is like a supercharged parent, the same way a hamburger is supercharged food. This is also why religions are so appealing and so difficult to let go of – we actively, desperately want to believe in something absolutely good that will take care of us. The devotion is similar to the one that exists between children and parents. Thomson implies (ibid. 46) that a supernormal parent may not be good for our well-being any more than supernormal food is.

Thomson argues (*Why we believe in god(s),* 78) that we do not need the external authority represented by religion to behave well and act morally. This is surely true, at least on the individual level, as illustrated by the innumerable well behaved atheists. In Thomson's view religious morality is all about following orders, while genuine morality is doing the right thing regardless of what we are told. He argues that the "right thing" is instinctive to us, and I gather that a religion can only twist this intuitive knowledge into needless contortions enforced by outside authority. At best religion is useless and unnecessary, at worst actively harmful, when matters of morality are concerned.

Many of Thomson's arguments are constructed in a strikingly uncharitable fashion. For example, as he discusses our social instincts that implore us to divide people into *us* and *them*, he is quick to point out how "Religions have served as a ready-made mechanism to define death-deserving out-groups." (ibid. 77) This is certainly true, but it is equally true that religions have played a crucial part in defining the care-deserving, love-deserving in-group as well. For there to exist any meaningful inclusion, strict exclusion is required. A community that includes all is no community at all. None of this is mentioned by Thomson.

Thomson's approach is highly individualistic – particularly so when he discusses morality. That *individuals* can be good without religious beliefs is obvious. He is grasping a low-hanging

fruit. What is missing from the analysis is appreciating religion as something social, communal. The question that both Durkheim and Wilson pose, is whether *societies* could be good and moral without religion – and furthermore – could societies even survive long without religion. These are much more difficult questions, ones which Thomson and his by-product theory overlook.

Thomson's singular focus on factual realism also skews his thesis. Where Wilson outlines an intricate interplay between factual realism and practical realism, the practicalities do not enter Thomson's argument in anything like their full force. For him, if religion is factually incorrect or logically unsound, it is automatically undesirable. However, as I have discussed in above sections, the degree to which a belief is factual does not determine its functionality. Utterly false beliefs can be much more functional and beneficial than factually correct ones – for instance in the aforementioned case of regarding one's enemies as sub-human. Should the goal be to win a war, propagating the factual truth on the matter should be regarded as counter-productive. It is a secular example of where practical realism and factual realism clash.

According to my interpretation, Thomson argues (*Why we believe in god(s),* 116) that the non-factual could be cut out from religion without anything of value being lost in the process. The problem – one which Thomson does not answer – is that following Durkheim's and Wilson's analysis the supernatural is what gives the moral system, social cohesion, and adaptive behaviour much of their force and direction. We are able to co-operate and establish societies because of non-factual beliefs, not in spite of them. Furthermore, as was argued by Durkheim, the supernatural and the moral are often fused together into a single entity. The contents cannot be brazenly separated from their container. The Christian concept of sin can be used to clarify the point.

Sin is a moral concept that will inevitably change any mental landscape in which it has a prominent position. However, the concept will become utterly incomprehensible without supernatural preconditions. Sin transforms immoral behaviour into something transcendental, increasing its gravity. When one does wrong it is not simply a matter of anti-social behaviour, but

an affront against the creator of the universe. However, if the supernatural creator is dismissed, the concept of sin loses its meaning. Consequently the significance of wrongdoing is curtailed in scope, hence the moral and the supernatural are interwoven. Christian morality is incoherent without its supernatural framework.

All told, Thomson does not accept the notion that it may be necessary to accept the supernatural content in order to gain access to the benefits of religion (*Why we believe in god(s),* 116). Religion merely exploits pre-existing psychological mechanisms. Hence, Thomson does not regard religion as adaptive, more as a parasite or at best a trickster or a freeloader. It appears that for him, to the degree that religion is beneficial at all, it is beneficial only incidentally. Furthermore, the benefits would be intensified if religion were removed from the equation.

4.2 Religion a defunct instinct

Jesse Bering discusses faith and religion from a similar perspective to Thomson. The approach is again one of evolutionary psychology, the workings of the brain. However, Bering argues that faith in God is something deeper than just a by-product of other psychological systems. He likens it to an instinct. Bering's thesis (*The God Instinct*, 7) is that faith in gods has uniquely helped us to solve adaptive problems in our evolutionary history. People with faith were more successful at surviving and reproducing than those without. Since Bering focuses mostly on the concept of God alone, his approach is narrower than Wilson's, but both of them take the adaptionist approach. Faith in God has had a functional, beneficial purpose. However, Bering thinks that while originally adaptive, faith may have grown out of date. It has served its purpose and is no longer useful as technology and scientific discovery can fill its place (ibid. 202). According to him, the watchful eye of God can be replaced by ever present security cameras. Here Bering differs from Hitchens' liberal position, in that Bering conjoins with the conservative tradition in emphasising the need for restraint. Though it appears Bering does not take seriously the high costs that follow from replacing an internalised,

fictional system of control with an external and realistic one. God works for free, while a police force requires payment, and security cameras constant maintenance.

Norenzayan takes Bering's line of thinking even further, arguing that the stronger and more powerful the government, the more likely the people are to become non-religious (*Big Gods*, 174). The more government intervenes in people's life – makes everyone feel safe and secure, gives them the sense that they are being looked-after and monitored – the less need people will feel for God and religion. When people can trust the government to save them from criminality, poverty, and other dangers of life, God becomes less relevant. This is partly, I think, what is meant by Jesus in the following famous passage:

> And again I say unto you, it is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle, than for a rich man to enter into the kingdom of God. (Matthew 19:24)

The acceptance of God and his grace is what the Christian concept of salvation absolutely demands. Jesus is pointing out that rich men (and by extension rich societies), who have enough material wealth to solve or mitigate the problems they face in life, will not have any particular need to rely on God and to be religious. Hence it will be practically impossible for them to enter the kingdom. This frame of mind where one does not perceive any particular need for God and hence does not even spend time contemplating the matter, is what Norenzayan calls "apatheism" which is prevalent in Scandinavia and welfare states more generally. Underlying this is a sense of *existential security* offered now by the state:

> Life expectancy and income levels increase, and with better nutrition and health care, infant mortality becomes a thing of the past. Moreover, with unemployment and retirement support, universal medical care, as well as poverty reduction strategies, people are rescued by social safety nets in times of trouble or uncertainty. (*Big Gods*, 185)

What, then, is the function of God if the people are all relatively affluent and the welfare state is the one who protects, cares-for, looks after and organises everything from cradle to grave? In effect the welfare state has replaced God as the rock on top of which people build their lives.

With functionalist arguments the organising principle is always society. To a limited extent this is the case with Bering as well. Religion and God gain their primary purpose from meeting the high requirements of facilitating successful interaction between people. Bering argues (*The God Instinct*, 7) that God is functional because he makes self-policing more effective. We posit an all-knowing force that will punish us for our misdemeanour even if we can hide our sins from other people. The God-assumption has been vital in improving the trustworthiness of individuals, and reducing anti-social behaviour in general. It is in everyone's benefit to cheat and break the rules for one's own benefit if one does not get caught. However, after God enters the picture, it is impossible not to get caught. Every misdeed will be noticed and judged whether or not they had any mortal witnesses. Language further emphasises the importance of self-restraint (ibid. 173). Language creates reputations that precede us. The future cost of doing something wrong will often be massive, because the relevant information will not be restricted to just those who witness the act, since they can and will pass it on to others.

It is easy to notice, however, that in Bering's analysis there is still a strong individualist leaning. Though he talks about co-operation and social relationships, he only talks of them in relation to an individual's personal benefit. Individual comes first, the social is secondary. Social factors are important only to the extent that they benefit the individual's survival and reproductive success:

> So when you dig deep enough into what are apparently selfless, pure-hearted motives, cynics can still rejoice in knowing that being good is ultimately, as evolutionary biologists point out, a selfish genetic enterprise. (*The God Instinct,* 188)

I believe David Sloan Wilson would surely agree with Bering in that being good is a genetic enterprise, but the disagreement would rise on whether it is a selfish one. According to Wilson (*Darwin's Cathedral*, 1), natural selection does not only occur on the individual level, but also on group level where human individuals form a single organismic unit. He argues that group level selection is very rare, but among us humans it has occurred in tandem with the basic individual

selection. Religion gives us a glimpse of the collective, bee-like mentality that humanity would have developed were our evolution driven solely by group-level selection (ibid. 46). Religion and a shared sense of morality are among group selection's primary results. According to Wilson, our evolutionary history is partly based on group selection, and this is the reason why we behave well when no reward is present, or even when good behaviour entails personal sacrifice.

Another important difference is that Bering, unlike Wilson or Durkheim, does not much care about the specific contents of religion:

> Put the scripture aside. Just as the scientist who studies the basic cognitive mechanisms of language acquisition isn't especially concerned with the particular narrative plot in children's bedtime stories, the cognitive scientist of religion isn't much concerned with the details of the fantastic fables buried in religious texts. (*The God Instinct*, 8)

Bering's interest is solely on the psychological underpinnings. I believe that this leads to a rather truncated and unsatisfying end result. I would argue that in order to arrive at a more satisfying conclusion, functionalism is required. This discussion on rival views should have offered a further justification for choosing functionalist analysis. As an approach, functionalism is considerably more pragmatic and all-inclusive than its rivals. Thomson restricted himself to answering the singular question of *how* does religious belief function, since according to him the contents are nonsensical and the function non-existent. Bering, on the other hand, asks both *why* and *how*, but not *what*. However, the functionalism present in Wilson and Durkheim tries to answer all three questions: *what* is believed, *why* is it believed and *how* is it believed. All of these questions have meaningful answers tied to function. In the following section literary analysis will be used to illustrate said answers.

5 Application and analysis

I will now discuss the topic of religion in two novels – George Eliot's *Silas Marner*, and Isaac Bashevis Singer's *The Slave* – using the functionalist approach while keeping in mind the more general conservative framework that religious functionalism is a natural a part of. The novels offer great opportunities both for independent analysis of how the Christian and Jewish religions function, but also the opportunity for comparison. In this section my purpose is to highlight the peculiarities of each novel, and to attempt to find out what is the function of religion is in each case. This will be followed by a final section where I synthesise my findings.

5.1 Silas Marner

Silar Marner is a 1861 story about religious communities in 19th-century England. In the course of his life the titular protagonist Silas is depicted both within community and without community, with and without religion. There are two different societies depicted in the story, both of them Christian. The functions of a religious community are described from multiple angles. We are offered both an insider and an outsider perspective. We are shown the effects of expulsion of a man from one religious community, and of his later inclusion to another. Thematically the novel has a great deal to offer for a reading based on religious functionalism. I will endeavour to illustrate that the nature of religion in the novel is functional. Religion is like a house: a construct that holds people close to each other, allows them to live together comfortably, and determines the specific form that a community takes. Yet the walls of the house also have the capacity to keep outsiders and rule-breakers at bay.

5.1.1 Lantern Yard

Lantern Yard is the first of the two religious communities Silas is a member of. The community is described as particularly devout. The members' fervent faith is illustrated by the supernatural

explanations given for Silas' fits. Many believe they are divinely inspired, but Silas' best friend, William Dane, suggests that they may represent visitations from the Devil. This is the first sign of Silas' oncoming betrayal by his friend. William is able to exploit the community's founding religious beliefs for his own benefit. He wants to have Silas' betrothed for himself, and for this purpose frames Silas as a thief. In Lantern Yard, the system of passing judgment is based on the drawing of lots. Apparently, among the founding principles of the community is something like the Calvinist idea of predestination. Whatever should happen, it is always God's will. This is why a blind lottery is as good a method as any for determining what God deems just. It is quite apparent that at least William sees through the system's obvious flaws, and is able to make use of them. In the end, Silas is deemed guilty, is excommunicated, his engagement nulled, and William gets to marry Silas' girl.

Silas is appalled by the result of the lottery. He is perfectly certain of his own innocence, yet God's will appears to deem otherwise. Spiteful and desperate, Silas accuses William and renounces his faith in front of the members of his former community:

> *You* stole the money, and you have woven a plot to lay the sin at my door. But you may prosper for all that: There is no just God that governs the earth righteously, but a God of lies that bears witness against the innocent. (*Silas Marner*, 19–20)

Silas' disillusionment is emblematic of the conservative view that veneration for an institution is difficult to establish but effortless to destroy (*Conservatism*, 65). Joseph de Maistre argued on the same topic with the memorable words "If therefore you want to conserve all, *consecrate* all" ("Generative Principle of Human Constitutions", 145). This is to say that a sense of sacred origins enhances the utility and longevity of an institution. Rational analysis tends to abolish this exaltation and the institution will lose its grip. In Silas' case religion loses its lustre for over a decade, and hence collapses also his trust for society and the fellow man.

Silas' fate at Lantern Yard offers a powerful example of the problems generated by rule-breakers, cheaters and exploiters to any community. The unwitting, the brash, or the careless are

relatively easy to deal with. The worst kind of offender is one who has attained a deep understanding of the rules, which he then uses to pervert or subvert their intended purpose. The Lantern Yard religious community has set up a powerful punitive system to punish rule-breakers, but it is of no use against a skilled schemer like William who is able to subjugate the system into serving his own ends. This is in line with C.S. Lewis' analysis of law. Law is rendered powerless if the people ruled by it are not rich in moral fibre. The real power of all laws is derived from the moral character of the people under them.

Although passing judgment based on a religious ritual like the drawing of lots seems preposterous, conservative thinkers like Louis de Bonald have argued that entirely separating religion from civil law may be hazardous and inhumane: "Religion directs will; the civil laws repress actions. To separate the direction of wills and the repression of actions in society is to separate the soul from the body in a man; it is to materialise society, to annihilate it, by destroying the principle of its strength and progress." (*On Divorce*, 132)

The strength and progress of the Lantern Yard community is based on a religiously directed cultural and social isolation. Living as a minority within a larger town, the people within this religious society adhere to their particular beliefs and rules. The rules could be completely arbitrary, but as long as each member of the community follows them with obedience, everyone gets to benefit from a stronger sense of unity and cohesion. I believe that while the drawing of lots is a deeply flawed method of meting out justice, it is conceivable that the social benefits of adhering to this peculiar system outweigh the negative effects. In general the lot drawing may even work well enough, as long as it is made sure that the suspect is always very likely to be guilty, and the odds of an acquittal are skewed very low. In a small religious community where people police themselves and each other, the possibility of avoiding justice or committing a crime in the first place may be reasonably slim. However, the setup falls apart when there is a schemer in the midst of the community, unscrupulous enough to exploit the system. This is perfectly in line with Wilson's

analysis. Cheaters are the bane of Christian altruism, hence powerful safeguards are needed and forgiveness must be regulated.

5.1.2 Isolation

Soon after the betrayal and excommunication, Silas leaves town and moves to the small, remote village of Raveloe. He is in the midst of another isolated Christian community, but Silas wants to have no part in it. He becomes a bitter recluse who has abandoned faith and in so doing abandoned community. The little meaning his life now has is based on the accumulation of wealth. Silas is a skilled weaver, and in the course of fifteen years of isolation he is able to accumulate a great deal of gold. Silas lives to work and to get paid. He does not even use the money for much aside from counting it and taking pleasure in looking at it. Silas' life is empty and his demeanour and physical appearance begin to take the form a cog in a machine. He becomes increasingly inseparable from the mechanical parts of his own loom. One could even argue that even in isolation he is not truly a self-sufficient individual, but remains part of a whole. In his case a part of a machine where he is as dependent of the other parts as they are of him:

> Strangely Marner's face and figure shrank and bent themselves into a constant mechanical relation to the objects of his life, so that he produced the same sort of impression as a handle or a crooked tube, which has no meaning standing apart. (*Silas Marner*, 28)

The metaphor is powerful. When the larger entity that Silas is a part of is no longer human, Silas turns increasingly crooked and inhuman. He shrinks and his appearance begins to change. "The prominent eyes which used to look trusting and dreamy, now looked as if they had been made to see only one kind of thing which was very small" (ibid. 28) Eliot depicts the individual as being not only psychologically or socially, but also physically determined by the kind of community he is a part of.

Silas sees his collection of gold coins as a companion of sorts. He gains pleasure from interacting with the money – he stares at the faces in the coins as a crude replacement of friendship.

The coins are not for him to spend, but to look at, to pile up, to count, and to bathe in. Money even begins to take the place of God in Silas' mind. It becomes a target of a kind of worship – the only source of meaning in Silas' life. However, from the perspective of a Durkheimian functionalist analysis, worship without a community is empty and pointless. Other people give meaning to religious feelings and practices.

Isolation does not remove interconnectedness or increase individualism in any full sense. It only alters the kind of dependence that one is bound by. The humane shrinks, the man grows crooked, as the mechanical and material relations begin to dominate. Silas' faith in his fellow man was dependent on his faith in God. He finds human interaction untenable without religion. He has no push and no pull, and from a functionalist perspective this is no surprise. According to Durkheim and Wilson, morality and effective co-operation rely on shared religion – shared sacred values and fundamental beliefs.

5.1.3 Raveloe

The isolation of the Raveloe community is emphasised repeatedly. The trends and changes taking place in the outside world are very slow in reaching Raveloe. The people of the village community live their lives in relative separation from wider society. Due to better soil and milder climate, the people are more easy-going and less devout than those of Lantern Yard. The harsher the environment, the stricter the requirements of religion.

Reminding ourselves of Wilson's thesis can help explain the described phenomenon further. As in the case exemplified by the Jews, a co-operative, adaptive religious community requires some form of isolation. For a small religious sect within a larger town the isolation needs to be artificially established through strict social and behavioural rules that separate *us* from *them*. In a remote, small, homogenous village like Raveloe, geography and small population in and of themselves form a boundary and give shape to the community. *Us* becomes a secure and obvious concept which does not require much further definition, or much protection from *them* that geography could not offer.

Consequently there is less need for strict rules, and religion can afford to be more lax. This is not to say that Raveloe is less religious or superstitious, but that the spectrum of beliefs in circulation is wider and less binding, and their content is not strictly enforced by the communal authorities.

Durkheim's aforementioned terminology is applicable here. On the one hand, the belief system in Lantern Yard was high both in volume and in intensity. The people believed the same things and the beliefs had clear effects in the lives of the individuals. In Raveloe, on the other hand, on both vectors religion is less powerful. People believe things along similar lines, but not to the same degree of uniformity as in a stricter society. The members of the community are Christians, but may or may not also believe in ghosts, for example. The effects of the shared beliefs on the members of the community are also less direct and obvious. There is no equivalent to the drawing of lots, for instance.

The problem of weeding out the cheaters and the exploiters rears its head in Raveloe as well. The greatest man in the town has two sons, Godfrey and Dunstan. Dunstan, or Dunsey, is an irresponsible lout. Dunsey is the one who extorts money from his brother, and the one who steals Silas' gold. Dunsey is relatively free to enjoy this immoral lifestyle partly because the explicit and enforced rules binding behaviour in Raveloe are less strict. Dunsey does not even need to employ great schemes or to be ingenious in any sense – plain lack of moral fibre is more than enough. The community relies heavily on mutual trust and self-policing. In such a setting, any dishonest cheater has relatively free rein.

This is not to say that the members of the community do not care about rule breaking. Based on Wilson's arguments outlined above, the rules simply are not broken all that often in an isolated, homogenous community that shares certain fundamental values. There is less need to worry about exploiters if exploiters are rare. This has been illustrated by the example of the low crime-rates and the general absence of social problems in Jewish ghettoes and communities throughout history. Christianity too, being founded on top of Judaism, has readily available to it most of the

mechanisms of Jewish social organization. In the case of Raveloe, the Christian faith shared by the small community lessens the need for temporal policing and punishment. Some have argued that secular retribution grows ever more crucial when religion and faith in God diminish within a society. When notions like divine judgment and hellfire no longer hold influence, material punishments need to take their place. As James Fitzjames Stephen phrased the issue:

> A man may disbelieve in God, heaven, and hell, he may care little for mankind or society, or for the nation to which he belongs, – let him at least be plainly told what are the acts which will stamp him with infamy, hold him up to public execration, and bring him to the gallows, the gaol, or the lash. (*A History of the Criminal Law of England*, 188)

It is notable how eager everyone is to help Silas after his gold has been stolen. Silas is forced out of his isolation by the loss of the gold, and the community is ready to help him even though it still regards Silas as a freak. Thievery is absolutely wrong and cannot go unpunished. People begin to feel sympathy for Silas as a victim of a devastating crime. Even though Silas is a strange and solitary man, after fifteen years the community is slowly beginning to see him as part of *us*.

This turn of events reminds me of the Bible passage cited above about needles and rich men. Silas' wealth was what prevented him from having faith and seeking society. Money may not only become a way to solve a man's temporal problems, thus lessening the pressure that the man would otherwise feel for seeking God, but wealth can also become a direct replacement of God and a target of worship in and of itself.

The social mechanics of the village can be examined again when the people begin to speculate who the thief might be. Another outsider – a travelling peddler – is a prime suspect. This again illustrates the isolationist mindset of the community. However, this is not simply the result of some blind xenophobia, but a consequence of the natural social mechanisms of a small, homogenous community. As one of the characters points out: "He'd better not say again as it was me robbed him […] What could I ha' done with his money? I could as easy steal the parson's surplice, and wear it." (*Silas Marner*, 71) Essentially, it would be extremely difficult for a thief from within to make any

use of the money without being noticed. The small, homogenous and inter-connected nature of the community sets certain practical limits. Crime does not pay if the structure of the society itself prevents the culprit from making any practical use of his winnings.

After the theft the people of Raveloe grow increasingly sympathetic of Silas. They try to look after him, bring him food, and some members of the community, Dolly Winthrop in particular, encourage him to begin attending church. Silas still refuses the offer, and mourns his lost gold in solitude. The importance of church attendance is made clear. Everyone attends, and social class does not matter in the church. However, in Raveloe attendance is not mandated or regulated, and it is made clear that almost no-one goes to Church every single Sunday. It would be deemed somewhat arrogant and self-righteous. Yet there appears to be a general agreement that everyone must go at least sometimes, and take part in the communion.

The functionalists point out that the church sermon is an event where the community is brought together and reminded of their shared values and sense of unity. That Silas refuses to partake shows us how he still sees himself as an outsider, even though the community itself is quite willing to bring him in and make him part of *us*. In the case of Raveloe the community is small and geographically isolated, and hence there is less of a pressing need for reminding everyone of their unity every Sunday – the unity of the community is quite apparent anyway, reinforced by daily life.

We are given a glimpse of what might be called "Raveloe theology" by Dolly, as she talks with Silas about matters of faith. She presents a very communal understanding of religion. Every member is to do their own part, and God will handle the rest. Everyone is to place their faith on "Them as are above us":

> I feel as I can put up wi' it, for I've looked for help I' the right quarter, and gev myself up to Them as we must all give ourselves up to at the last; and if we'n done our part, it isn't to be believed as Them as are above us 'ull be worse nor we are, and come short o' Their'n. (ibid. 102)

The Christianity of Raveloe is a well-ordered system where each member has their proper place. People must trust God to take care of things in the end, and in the meantime everyone should

concentrate on fulfilling their own part in life. The system is highly communal, encourages social cohesion and a calming sense of hierarchy. It is not "my God", but "our God".

Silas' transformation begins in full force when he becomes the caretaker and foster-father of a little girl, Eppie. This is the first meaningful human relationship for Silas in over fifteen years. This initial social bond then creates new ones. The other villagers begin to feel ever increasing sympathy towards Silas, they offer their help in taking care of the child, and Silas becomes ever more connected to the community. Among all the support comes the mandate, from Dolly, to raise the child into a proper Christian:

> [Y]ou'll have the right to her if you're a father to her, and bring her up according. But […] you must bring her up like christened folk's children, and take her to church, and let her learn her catechize […] That's what you must do, Master Marner, if you'd do the right thing by the orphin child. (*Silas Marner.* 151)

This is followed by the important event of baptism, both of Silas and of Eppie. This event marks Silas' first attendance to church. It is also the official moment when Silas becomes "one of *us*". Religion is the nucleus around which the community is formed. From religion the people of Raveloe gain a sense of unity, and their understanding of what is proper. Religion gives rise to the norms and values which are considered particularly crucial when rearing children.

The matter of crime and punishment is again emphasised when Dolly teaches Silas how to deal with Eppie's misdemeanours. "But I put it upo' your conscience, Master Marner, as there's one of 'em you must choose – ayther smacking or the coal-hole – else she'll get so masterful, there'll be no holding her." (ibid. 155) When talking about a coal-hole Dolly means a punishment she herself devised raising her own son: trapping him in a pitch dark coal-hole for a short while. The message is clear – whichever form of sanction Silas chooses is not particularly important, as long as tangible punishment occurs.

This lesson is difficult for Silas, because the demands of love are described as conflicting. The responsible thing for a loving parent to do is to mete out punishment. Ultimately Silas fails, as the coal-hole method does not work with Eppie, and Silas cannot bring himself to hurt the girl

physically. Eppie is allowed to grow without punishment, "the burden of her misdeeds being borne vicariously by father Silas." (*Silas Marner.* 158)

The difficulty of punishment is analogous to the whole of Christian communal ethics discussed extensively by Wilson. Turning the other cheek and loving your neighbour are one side of the coin, while on the other side loom the necessary corollaries of punishing cheaters and vigilance against exploitation. If the criminal is not punished, then the society as a whole will suffer vicariously in the criminal's place. A similar situation is described between the village's most desirable bachelor, Godfrey, and his rich father. Godfrey himself wishes that he had been raised with more discipline. He believes that externally imposed rules would have helped in the growth of internal willpower:

> He was not likely to be very penetrating in his judgments, but he had always had a sense that his father's indulgence had not been kindness, and had had a vague longing for some discipline that would have checked his own errant weakness, and helped his better will. (ibid. 88)

Durkheim's argument concerning social relationships that bind us to life holds strong in Silas' case. The depressive, individualist loop that characterised Silas' life is broken by the introduction of a child to his life. Silas now lives for someone else than himself. The child works as the catalyst for great change.

The change becomes obvious when close to the end of the novel we jump ahead another sixteen years. We now witness Silas not only as part of the Raveloe community, but as one of its most appreciated members. The social links between him and others have multiplied greatly from the initial one between him and Eppie. In the final chapter Silas visits Lantern Yard trying to gain a sense of resolution to his troubled past. The town has changed greatly, however, and Silas' old religious community is nowhere to be found. Silas resigns to the notion that his questions will never be answered. This is in the end quite easy for him, since he has found a new source of faith in Eppie:

> "Since the time the child was sent to me and I've come to love her as myself, I've had light enough to trusten by; and, now she says she'll never leave me, I think I shall trusten till I die." (*Silas Marner.* 215)

The novel closes with one final Christian ceremony of transition – the wedding of Eppie to her childhood friend Aaron. Now Silas stands at the very centre of society as the celebrated bride's father, and we get to see his transformation complete.

Silas Marner illustrates the way how religion gives societies their character and maintains their coherence. Lantern Yard is Lantern Yard because of its particular brand of Christianity. Same is true with Raveloe. Religion as a force that suppresses unwanted behaviour is a particular social topic discussed extensively. Both the benefits and the pitfalls of internalised systems of control are examined. This wider social level is a point of emphasis, but at the same time the novel shows how religion affects the individual. A key topic here is the way how religion binds the individual into the collective. Without his faith Silas is isolated. In the novel this isolation is depicted very literally, even down to describing Silas' physical appearance being determined by social conditions. The theme behind these events is much more far-reaching, however.

A society without a religion to bind it into a cohesive unit does not transform all its members into hunchbacked hermits. However, the functionalist would argue that in a less obvious way the individuals do become more distant from each other. To phrase the matter in Burkean terms, when the people as a whole no longer automatically inherit their disposition as a form of prejudice, there is less reliability and less familiarity in the mental landscapes of the other members of society. Values can no longer be taken for granted, since people are not socialised into a shared sense of habitual virtue, and are instead encouraged to mistrust their inherited prejudices.

5.2 The Slave

The Slave is a 1962 novel by the Jewish Nobel-prize winning author Isaac Bashevis Singer. It is, like *Silas Marner*, a story of religion, and discusses the phenomenon both from the internal, individual viewpoint, and from the external, societal angle. Theology is much more openly and extensively discussed in comparison to *Silas Marner*. Additionally, here the focus is more strongly on the feelings and thoughts of the protagonist as he struggles with his faith. The actual events in the narrative serve to propel his inner wrestling match into new directions.

Jacob is a young, highly learned Jewish man who has been made a slave in 17th century Poland. In the course of the novel we see Jacob amongst two major religious communities, one ostensibly Christian, the other Jewish. There are other Jewish communities where Jacob stays, but I will be focusing on the most central one.

5.2.1 The mountain village

Before the beginning of the story, Jacob's hometown has been burned by Cossacks and his family killed, whilst Jacob himself has ended up a slave. In the abject circumstances of slavery, Jacob lives alone on top of a mountain next to a Christian village. As a social outcast he herds cows. The only road down the mountain takes through the village below. Jacob's subsistence depends on food brought to him daily from the village. It quickly becomes obvious that the Christianity of the village is only nominal. By and large the people still follow their ancient pagan traditions, with merely a Christian crust surrounding them. In accordance with what is described as a common phenomenon in Poland at the time, Christianity had not taken root among the peasantry, and paganism still thrived in actuality.

Within the village itself, the goings on are not quite as barbarous as atop the mountain where Jacob lives. The village maintains at least some shallow appearances of Christianity, even though the local priest is a corrupt drunkard who has forgotten everything he ever learned in his seminary. Recurrently the reader hears of matters like incest being a fairly common practice, and general

sexual morality being non-existent. A sense of sanctity, or any sense of absolute morality are hard to find, even the dead are at times treated in an obscene fashion. On top of the mountain, however, all semblance of civilization is utterly lost:

> Night and day they [girls] bothered him. Attracted by his tall figure, they sought him out and talked and laughed and behaved little better than beasts. In his presence they relieved themselves, and they were perpetually pulling up their skirts to show him insect bites on their hips and thighs. 'Lay me,' a girl would shamelessly demand, but Jacob acted as if he were deaf and blind…. Some of them could scarcely speak Polish, grunted like animals, made signs with their hands, screamed and laughed madly….
>
> The village abounded in cripples, boys and girls with goiters, distended heads and disfiguring birth marks…. In summer, the parents of these deformed children kept them on the mountains with the cattle, and they ran wild. There, men and women copulated in public; the women became pregnant…. If the child died, they buried it in a ditch without Christian rites or else threw it into the mountain stream. (*The Slave*, 7-8)

Jacob is surrounded by people who live in a constant state of degradation. The boundary between the sacred and the profane is not recognised in the least. Sex is simply copulation, a form of pleasurable pastime activity. The corpse of a baby to them is like garbage. The bestial conditions are made more poignant by the grunts and screams that often take the place of speech.

The establishment of sexual morality, of chastity and of sanctity are among the key functions of the Christian religion, as was mentioned above in relation to the sexual revolution in ancient Rome. The topic of obscenity is also extensively discussed in the conservative tradition. Irving Kristol ("The Case for Censorship", 363) argues that obscenity is about depriving us of our human qualities, about the reduction of what is human into the level of mere animal, or material. This is fundamental particularly in his analysis of sexual morality. When sex is made public, pornographic, the human emotional connection disappears, at least in the eyes of the spectators. What we are left with is a bestial act of copulation. This vulgar sense of sexuality is what prevails in the mountain village. The same applies to the funeral processes – human corpses are at times treated like those of animals, or simply as lumps of waste. Repeatedly Jacob describes the behaviour of the villagers as bestial. Men sometimes bark like dogs, growl like animals, many women give birth alone in the

bushes, and some scarcely know how to even speak. The community described is in its nature obscene. Its members do not have reliable access to the social institutions – in particular the influence of functional religion – that help define us as specifically human. Hence their culture remains debased.

Following the functionalist theory, obscenity is something a successful religion has the capacity to ameliorate and prevent, and to lift a culture towards higher ideals. What we witness in the village community is dysfunctional religion. A confused mess of crude paganism with some Christian ornamentation. Seemingly the only man in the community capable of concentrating on any higher ideals is Jacob. He manages this feat by concentrating solely on his own, functional religious tradition. It is at several points noted how Jacob is much more thoughtful, responsible and diligent than his fellow cowherds. His cows are better fed and more healthy, his labour more productive, and his thoughts deeper. This is, it is arguable, the function of his religion at work. It lifts Jacob above obscenity, opens his mind to higher ideals, and obligates him to increased responsibility.

Edmund Burke (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 108), argues that the weakening of the humanising, civilising force of religion renders a culture vulnerable to degradation, to the ever present gravitational pull towards obscenity. An "uncouth, pernicious, and degrading superstition" is always ready and willing to replace a more functional religion if allowed to do so. It is not certain whether the community described in the novel was ever actually Christian and later degraded back into paganism, but in any case we do gain a glimpse into a society where uncouth, pernicious and degrading superstitions hold sway.

Another key scene depicting the barbarism of the so called Christians is worth citing here. Jacob, who is normally quite gentle, is forced to reach dire conclusions on the matter:

> An awful stench rose from that mob; the odors of sweat and urine mingled with something for which there is no name, as if these bodies were putrefying while still alive…. The men hee-hawed and whinnied, supported themselves on each other's shoulders, and barked like dogs. Some collapsed on the path, but their companions did

> not pause to assist them, but stepped over the recumbent bodies. Jacob was perplexed. How could the sons of Adam created in God's image have fallen into such depths?" (*The Slave*, 42)
>
> 'Well, now I have seen it,' he said to himself. 'These are those abominations which prompted God to demand the slaying of entire peoples.'…. now that Jacob had observed this rabble he understood that some forms of corruption can only be cleansed by fire. Thousands of years of idolatry survived in these savages. Baal, Astoreth, and Moloch stared from their bloodshot and dilated eyes. (*The Slave,* 43)

The desperate depth of debasement prominent in the community is depicted poignantly. The utter heartlessness of these people is remarkable. Not only is their behaviour outwardly filthy and repulsive, it is accompanied by selfish, uncaring behaviour rising from inside. Jacob finds all this absolutely hopeless, and is reminded of the Canaanite tribes that God instructed his chosen people to eliminate. Only by witnessing first-hand just how low man can fall does he come to understand the fate of the Canaanites. We find an apparent connection between moral standards and civil behaviour. Following Durkheim, we should again remind ourselves of contents and of containers. Civil behaviour may be regarded as one of the containers of moral good. Should civility not be maintained, it is questionable whether moral excellence can be reliably accessed without it.

Surrounded by savagery during his years of bondage, Jacob tries his best to spiritually isolate himself from the surrounding corruption. It helps that for the most part of each year Jacob lives alone atop the mountain, and is only intermittently forced to encounter his fellow cowherds, described in the above quotation, or the villagers below. Jacob does all he can to adhere to the laws of Moses, he fulfils all possible rituals, only eats what is kosher, and upholds a strict ethical standard for himself. Much of his time Jacob spends in deep thought, trying to dredge out of memory verses of the Hebrew Bible. Jacob even begins a project of carving all of God's commandments on a stone behind the cowshed in which he lives.

Jacob's behaviour offers us an example of the effectiveness of Jewish isolationism in a microcosm. As has been mentioned, a primary function of the Mosaic laws is to establish self-enforced isolation from the gentiles, from the outsiders. What is remarkable in Jacob's case is that

the rules retain their strength even without the support of community. Jacob would benefit greatly from abandoning his faith. Powerful temptations haunt him every day, year after year, and yet he chooses to remain in a minority of one.

His unyielding spiritual efforts coupled with hard manual labour give Jacob some solace, but a special reason for both joy and abnegation is a village girl named Wanda, who brings Jacob food atop the mountain every day. She is the young widowed daughter of Jacob's owner and master. The two have fallen deeply in love with each other, but Jacob does all he can to resist temptation. A Jew is not to touch a woman he is not married to, let alone lay with a gentile. Jacob interprets his powerful sense of lust and longing as Satan's temptation, urging him to sacrifice the eternal for the temporal. "Satan became arrogant and spoke to Jacob insolently: 'There is no God. There is no world beyond this one.' He bid Jacob become a pagan among the pagans; he commanded him to marry Wanda or at the very least to lie with her." (ibid. 41) "'Remember this world is only a corridor,' he warned himself. 'The true palace lies beyond. Don't let yourself be barred from it for the sake of a moment's pleasure.'" (ibid. 16)

Jacob's spiritual struggle touches both on the aforementioned conservative theme of the importance of restraints, and more specifically on the beneficial function of self-policing that a religion can offer. In the words of Edmund Burke (*Reflections on the Revolution in France*, 120): "But what is liberty without wisdom, and without virtue? It is the greatest of all possible evils; for it is folly, vice, and madness, without tuition or restraint…. To give freedom is still more easy. It is not necessary to guide; it only requires to let go the rein." In the mountain village we see the folly, the vice and the madness all in full force. The crude religious structure of confused superstitions does not establish a functional system of self-policing. The villagers have no sense of self-abnegation, and only power externally wielded has any real meaning. The people do not hold the reins of their own behaviour, and the result is a poor and debased community that has little to show in terms of mutual trust or individual dignity.

Jacob, however, is able to swim against the current. He holds himself to an incredibly high moral standard, even though there is no external power to force his hand – in fact the opposite is true. All possible rational and emotional reasons tempt Jacob to abandon his principles, let go of his laws and traditions, become a pagan among pagans. Rationally, he would be much safer were he not a lone Jew among barbaric Christians. He could also attain fulfilment with the love of his life, as well as more general social acceptance, were he to "liberate" himself, i.e. to dismiss the demands of faith and the restrictions placed by the laws of Moses.

This speaks to the above mentioned conservative worries concerning the weaknesses of reason. The utmost personal dignity and responsibility which Jacob is able to maintain against all odds, are only possible because he is acting in an unreasonable manner. It is now worthwhile to remind ourselves also of David Hume's ("Of the Origin of Government", 49) argument, of justice being based on obedience, and of how obedience cannot ultimately lay on top of reason. It requires tradition, habit, and intuition as its foundation. These are very much the sources of Jacob's spiritual resilience and adherence to the Mosaic laws.

The spiritual wrestling match against his feelings for Wanda has been ongoing within Jacob for years. With seeming inevitability, after a long process of attrition, Jacob's resolve ultimately flounders. "His yearning stayed with him praying and studying, sleeping and waking. He knew the bitter truth: compared to his passion for Wanda, his mourning for his wife and children and his love for God were weak. If the desires of the flesh came from Satan, then he was in the Devil's net. 'Well, I have lost both worlds,' he muttered" (*The Slave,* 47) Soon after these thoughts of resignation, the relationship with the gentile girl is consummated. This may not be a surprising end result, at least if we follow Durkheim who argued that the social element is what gives religion strength and makes the believer feel connected to God. Without the supporting social rituals of a Jewish community, the power of Jacob's individual resolve proves insufficient.

Through a fluke Jacob manages to send a message to the remnants of his Jewish community, informing them that he is still alive. One day, out of the blue, the Jews come and ransom him free. Jacob is unable to see Wanda before he is suddenly taken back home.

In his hometown everything has changed as his village had to be rebuilt from scratch after its utter destruction in the Cossack raid. For a while the scholarly Jacob works as a teacher of the faith. However, ominous dreams of Wanda begin to haunt him, and the longing is again relentless. Ultimately Jacob cannot find peace of mind, and travels back to the village to find his beloved.

5.2.2 Pilitz

Jacob's quest is successful, he finds Wanda, and they escape the mountain village together. The two establish a new life as a married couple in the more remote Jewish community of Pilitz, where no-one knows Jacob. Wanda has to change her name to Sarah, and has to play deaf and dumb so as not to be revealed as a convert through her accent and insufficient skill in Yiddish.

In Pilitz, the religious circumstances and the ensuing discussions are different from before. The Christian characters – the lord and lady of the town – are quite intelligent and knowledgeable of the teachings of the Bible. Yet in them too lies corruption, though of a more sophisticated sort. The Jews of the town follow a similar pattern – they know the laws, but adhere to them only partially. These contradictions and hypocrisies form the spine of the thematic discussions in the latter half of the novel.

In the mountain village matters were so hopelessly debased that hypocrisy had no real place. Not even shallow appearances of piety were kept up with any seriousness. Much of the time people simply did what they felt like doing, ignorant of or indifferent to any moral code. In Pilitz, however, the characters are genuinely religious, and preoccupied with maintaining a remarkable façade of piety. In some respects, the reality in the Jewish community is even more depressing to Jacob. The Jews are to be held to a higher standard. These are people who know better than they act, people whose immoral behaviour cannot be explained through sheer ignorance or barbarousness. "They

wanted to be good to God and not to man; but what did God need of man and his favors? What does a father want from his children but that they should not do injustice to each other? …. Perhaps it was the reason the Messiah did not come." (*The Slave*, 162) "Legalisms and rituals proliferated without diminishing the narrow-mindedness of the people; the leaders ruled tyrannically; hatred, envy, and competition never ceased." (ibid. 177)

To make matters worse, as the moral fibre is corroded societally, its bindings on the individual level start to loosen as well:

> Satan tried to prove him that corruption being general, sin could be taken lightly. The Spirit of Good replied: 'Why concern yourself with what others do? Look to yourself.' But Jacob had no peace. Everywhere he heard people asserting things that their eyes denied. Piety was the cloak for envy and avarice. The Jews had learned nothing from their ordeal; rather, suffering had pushed them lower. (ibid. 87)

We are again reminded of how C.S. Lewis argued that law left on its own is weak. Morality cannot simply be an outside force inscribed in laws, it has to live and operate within people and within societies. To assume otherwise is to engage in the same empty legalism which has become so characteristic of the town of Pilitz. A law, even a Mosaic one, will not in itself lessen envy, hatred or tyranny – only internal moral improvement can avail us there.

The second issue at hand is that the Jews of Pilitz have come to emphasise the laws that regulate the relationship between God and man over the ones regulating the relationship between man and man. This may be an inherent risk in such a law based religion. Individual, subjective emphasis ends up placed on laws that the believer finds most crucial. God is thought paramount, and as long as man is righteous towards God, failings in other regards may be more acceptable. As I have discussed above in relation to Wilson's and Durkheim's work, Christianity does an admirable job closing this loophole. In the Christian moral system, a primary way to please God is by loving one's neighbour. Piety is demonstrated through simple, common place moral behaviour in the daily life, targeted at the fellow man. This is in contrast to elaborate Jewish cleansing rituals and kosher rules.

In the above quotation, Jacob points out that "suffering has only pushed them [the Jews] lower". This could be a mechanism of Jewish isolationism. When great hardship faces the group one belongs in, there may be a strong inclination to demonstrate one's belonging in the group – even more rigorously than usual. In the Jewish case this happens most naturally through adherence to the above mentioned laws that are used to separate Jews from gentiles. These have a great deal to do with superficial matters such as clothing, rituals, diet, and so on. Hence the frustrating phenomenon Jacob notes, of hardship only intensifying legalisms and rituals, without leading to moral improvement.

One day there is commotion in the town, and due to a misunderstanding Sarah thinks that Jacob is in grave danger. Hysterical, she starts crying and pleading for mercy for her husband. People are mystified to find the mute woman speaking. For the couple's great fortune, the event is interpreted as a miracle – a wonderful moment where God temporarily gave Sarah a voice to protect her husband.

The town's Christian lord Pilitzky had been the reason for the aforementioned commotion. He has great trouble with his own faith – among other things he has been frustrated to have never witnessed a miracle. Hence this miraculous event leads to Jacob becoming the lord's trusted man and to a great rise in Jacob's influence. Yet at the same time Jacob knows that it is all founded on a great lie, and were it to be revealed, both he and Sarah would in all likelihood be executed.

The problems of faith that the story's central Christians face are somewhat different from the empty legalism of the Jews. Adam Pilitzky, the lord of the town, is knowledgeable with the Bible, but both him and his wife Theresa act against the teaching. In their case the immediate sins are sexual. "Husband and wife had driven each other into an insane labyrinth of vice. He procured for her and she procured for him. She watched him corrupt peasant girls and he eavesdropped on her and her lovers…. But both were pious, lit candles, went to confession, and contributed money for the building of churches and religious monuments." (*The Slave,* 130)

In lord Pilitzky's case this behaviour is combined both with deep seated doubt and with painful guilt. He is doubtful of God's existence, worried that everything might be governed by blind chance. Pilitzky desperately wants a confirmation that there is someone who cares and takes notice. The guilt he feels is due to his own depravity, as well as his previous cruel actions suppressing a rebellion. The man has recurrent thoughts of suicide, cannot sleep, is physically ill, is mentally pained by the idea of the women he has widowed and the children he has made fatherless. The pleasures of the body no longer invigorate him. Alcohol is of little consolation, and he needs to seek new avenues of perversion to fight off impotency:

> Adam Pilitzky had seen no miracles himself and resented this. The devil subverted and denied the wonders of God in a thousand ways; hidden in every heart was some doubt. Often when Pilitzky lay awake thinking of what was going on in the country, Lucifer came and whispered in his ear: 'Don't they all speak of miracles? The Greek Orthodox, the Protestants, even the infidel Turks? How does it come about that God sometimes rides with the Protestants bringing them victories? ....' Pilitzky listened to Lucifer; at heart, he may have believed man merely animal who returns to dust, and hence condoned his wife's licentiousness. (*The Slave,* 130)

We again return to the theme of obscenity. In Pilitzky's case, the liberating idea of considering human beings as mere animals supports his depraved behaviour. Sex among animals is mere copulation, and virtues like chastity and chivalry lose all meaning. Pilitzky can accept his wife's unfaithfulness as well as his own perversions based on the idea that people are just dust. After all, obscenity ceases to be a problem if there is no ultimate distinction between man and animal – bestial behaviour is simply the nature of a beast. Pilitzky's morality as a whole becomes incoherent, yet the guilt remains.

Jacob has a long discussion with lord Pilitzky about matters of faith. Pilitzky is growing doubtful of the veracity of the miraculous claims concerning Jacob's wife, and wants to find out what sort of man Jacob really is. An important topic discussed are the differences between Jews and Christians:

> You've been waiting for the Messiah for a thousand years – what am I talking about? – for more than fifteen hundred, and he doesn't appear. The reason is clear. He has come already

> and revealed God's truth. But you are a stubborn people. You keep yourself apart. You regard our meat as unclean, our wine as an abomination. You are not permitted to marry our daughters. You believe you are God's chosen people. Well, what has he chosen you for? To live in the dark ghettos and wear yellow patches….
>
> 'I can convince no one, my lord,' Jacob began to stammer. 'I inherited my faith from my parents and I followed it to the best of my ability.' (ibid. 136)

In this snippet of dialog are condensed many of the central themes of the novel. Among them is Jewish isolationism which Pilitzky's argument underlines. As has been discussed, this creation of a unified in-group is a key function of religion, and is especially powerful in Judaism. But the question is, what do the Jews gain from it? Persecution and distrust from the surrounding society, certainly, but also staggering resilience. Jacob represents the Jewish race in microcosm. His devout Judaism renders him isolated from others, but at the same time gives him the tools for the moral, spiritual and even physical tenacity that he exhibits throughout the novel.

The relationship to the Messiah establishes a crucial difference between Jews and Christians. A key function and an explanation of the remarkable success of Christianity is based on the exciting Good News that the Messiah already came, and now it is only a matter time before his inevitable, glorious return. Judaism is by necessity more muffled and understated. There are no particular good news to talk about. There is nothing to proselytise, little to be excited about. The foremost goal with Judaism is temporal and practical – establishing, building, and maintaining the land of Israel.

When pressed, Jacob is forced to describe his faith simply as an inheritance from his ancestors. This may seem arbitrary or weak, but actually it concerns the most important territory of religion. It transports us back to the very heart of the matter. What is religion about? According to the functionalist theory, religion facilitates co-operation and transforms individuals into a unified social organism. This idea goes hand in hand with the general conservative idea of religion as a stabilising force that bestows a society with longevity. Religion is an intricate web of traditions, values and morals that binds together not only individuals, but even generations. It gives each civilization its unique, persistent character. The longevity of a civilization is dependent on its

values', morals', and traditions' successful transmission to the next generation. If we accept – in accordance with Durkheim and others – that religion is a symbolic amalgamation of a society's values, traditions and morals, then pointing out that religion is inherited is no slight. What could be a more valuable inheritance?

Sarah is pregnant, and while giving birth she cannot help but to speak and cry out again. This time demonic possession is initially suspected, but quickly the truth is revealed that Sarah is not actually mute at all. The birthing process is troubled, and soon after Sarah dies of complications. While Jacob is mourning his departed wife, Christian soldiers come to take him to prison to await a probable execution for the crime of converting a Christian into Judaism.

The strenuous relationship between Christians and Jews had been present in the earlier parts of the novel as well, but it is in Pilitz where the theme reaches a highpoint. A particularly painful issue is the problem of conversion – shifting from one in-group to another, in functionalist terms.

The problem as described is twofold. Christians who converted to Judaism were executed according to the laws of Poland. Furthermore, Jewish law forbade conversion except for reasons of faith. In Wanda's case the reason would have been love and marriage. The puzzlingly harsh punishments and sanctions are difficult to understand without applying the functionalist approach. People shifting from one in-group to another creates disunity and stirs an angered sense of betrayal within the community. Following Durkheim's arguments, changing one's religion can understandably be perceived as betrayal of the traditions, the values, and the morals that give character to the society one is a part of. In the strained and ultra-competitive situation of 17th century Poland, changing one's religion would be akin to joining the enemy, an act of treason.

In addition to the schism between Jews and Christians, Christianity is no monolith. Poland is a Catholic country and lord Pilitzky regards all other denominations as heresies. Christians other than Catholics are really no better than the Jews. When Jacob mentions that Christians destroyed his home, Pilitzky argues that Cossacks are not Christians, given that they are Greek Orthodox. The

division runs deep. Not only is there division between Christians and Jews, but between different sects of Christianity.

A functionalist approach to religion helps greatly in explaining the situation. Religion is about society. It is crucial in establishing a cohesive in-group which is always in opposition to competing out-groups. Small theological dissimilarities are more than sufficient grounds for seemingly meaningless division. Yet the division is ultimately necessitated by the more essential reasons of societal delineation and communal unity, rather than by the theological disagreement which is discussed more openly. The divisions are meaningless on the surface, but meaningful underneath. This is an example of the layered nature of religion discussed by Wilson and Durkheim. Often the conscious, openly stated reasons have little to do with the actual social functions which motivate the superficial reasoning. Ultimately, the Christian ideal of openness cannot always match with the demands of natural sociology. A system based on the ideal of incorporating all followers of Christ regardless of background splinters off into sects that regard each other as heretics. These failures and compromises are a recurring theme. Christian ideals of universal love and charity end up curtailed by practical limits in the human condition. I would argue that at the heart of the matter is Christianity's core tendency to demand much yet to expect little:

> Be ye therefore perfect, even as your Father which is in heaven is perfect. (Matthew 5:48)

In the Sermon on the Mount Christ calls for perfection, yet the expectation is that sinful beings will always utterly fail in the attempt. I would argue that the Christian model of social harmony is, quite self-consciously, a desperate struggle against the human limitations, where the goal can never be reached. After failing to reach any of the high ideals we are left with an endless series of compromises. Yet arguably the point of an ideal is not to reach it but to grasp for it. Even a compromised harmony is superior to chaos.

Jacob manages to escape on the way to prison, and returns to Pilitz to reclaim his newborn son. Jacob purposefully gives his son the name Benjamin. Jacob is well aware of the Biblical connotations: Benjamin was one of the sons of the patriarch Jacob. Together they travel to the Holy Land and found a new life there. Benjamin becomes a teacher and a father of three, while Jacob leads the life of an ascetic, always choosing the most difficult and strenuous path.

After twenty years Jacob returns to Pilitz alone. He has the dream of finding Sarah's bones and bringing them with him back to Jerusalem so that he can build a joint grave for his wife and himself. Jacob is deeply disappointed to hear the graveyard has been expanded, that Sarah's haphazardly dug convert's grave is no longer marked, and that no one knows the location of her remains.

The story of Jacob's life is surprisingly well remembered in the town, and the people respect the virtuous man. On his first night back in Pilitz, Jacob falls seriously ill and soon after perishes. While a grave is being dug for Jacob, the diggers hit some well-preserved bones. Quite miraculously, it is now apparent that Sarah's grave has been located. Jacob's final wish is fulfilled and he is laid to rest with his wife in a dignified grave of a much admired Jewish couple.

The Slave shows us how religion determines lives and how it defines societies. This time the topic is approached from the viewpoint of a pious man whose life is a struggle against surrounding impiety. We are given an illustration of a society without functional religion, and later on another society is described where religion has been rendered superficial and hypocritical. Much attention is paid to resulting obscenity, the transgressions between the border of the sacred and the profane.

The novel discusses extensively the importance of the transcendental element in human existence. It shows us how without it, individuals and societies become initially petty, ultimately debased. The people of the mountain village are utterly bestial, while the people of Pilitz fill their lives with empty legalisms and hypocrisies. Roger Scruton argues ("The Return of Religion", 134) that respecting the boundary between the sacred and the profane, and by extension attaining an

existence that is not solely material, are fundamental human needs. A functional religion offers us the necessary social and theological infrastructure that enables us to maintain a secure grip of the transcendental. If this requirement is not fulfilled, if the sacred and the immaterial are neglected, we end up living in animal societies, rather than human ones.

6 Conclusion

The two novels that I have studied in this thesis differ both in terms of style and focus. While reading *The Slave* one spends a large amount of time within the mind of the individual believer. The inner workings of the religious frame of mind are described with nuance, whereas in *Silas Marner* we remain more on the bird's eye societal level. Only rarely do we get a glimpse into the theological justifications of the observed social behaviour.

Both novels shed light on the communal nature of religion, the way it establishes cohesive groups, and maintains borders at the outer limit of each. *Silas Marner* puts particular emphasis on the time-tested topic of crime and punishment, and the role religion plays in the phenomenon. In *The Slave*, obscenity and temptation are key topics, and religion can be perceived as the opposing force of both.

Temptation and crime are connected, as both relate to the notion of restraint. As Irving Kristol phrased the issue: "Being frustrated is disagreeable, but the real disasters in life begin when you get what you want." ("The Case for Censorship", 361) The need for restraint is a much discussed conservative topic. James Fitzjames Stephen argues against the alternative in the following:

> It is one of the commonest beliefs of the day that the human race collectively has before it splendid destinies of various kinds, and the road to them is to be found in the removal of all restraints on human conduct, in the recognition of a substantial equality between all human creatures, and in fraternity or general love. These doctrines are in many cases held as a religious faith…. Such, stated of course in the most general terms, is the religion of which I take "Liberty, Equality, Fraternity" to be the creed. I do not believe it. (*Liberty, Equality, Fraternity*, 190)

It could be said that in Stephen's framework we are not witnessing a struggle between religion and secularism, but instead there are two religions fighting for dominance – one focused on the preservation of restraints, the other on their abolishment. This argument fits well in Durkheim's model: according to it religion is, after all, a general amalgamation of values, a description of what a society holds sacred. The discussion on the topic of restraint in both novels is quite nuanced.

While both consider restraint an essential force in society, the problems and sacrifices it entails are not ignored. Maintaining strict self-restraint would have cost Jacob the love of his life. In a similar vein, the society of Lantern Yard is ultimately easy to exploit by manipulating the system of coercive restraint that it has in place.

Aside from the general theme of religion as a social force, the main parallel connecting the two works is the one between the protagonists. Both are men living in isolation because of faith. In Jacob's case it is his unyielding faith that keeps him apart from the pagans, Christians and hypocrites that surround him. In Silas' case, it is his distinct lack of faith that causes his isolation from a perfectly agreeable community. In both cases, the phenomenon can be explained through the functionalist analysis. It is the function of a religion both to facilitate co-operation and to delineate groups. Without religion to connect him to his surroundings Silas cannot co-operate, and adhering to a non-matching religion Jacob remains outside the group, equally separate. The topic of delineation recurs in *The Slave* when the struggles between Jews and Christians are discussed, not to mention the way Christianity itself has splintered into Catholicism, Greek Orthodoxy and Protestantism.

Another parallel regards the two girls – the feminine influence is what reconnects both men to others and makes them part of society. While a daughter re-establishes Silas' faith, a wife causes Jacob to struggle with his. In Silas we see a man who is driven into empty monotony and purely material frame of mind after losing faith. In Jacob we witness a man who retains a large soul and a deep spiritual life even though his circumstances are either base and bestial, or legalistic and hypocritical. In Silas' case a girl saves him from the predicament, while in Jacob's case matters are more complicated. Wanda causes temptation and struggle, but ultimately the ordeals that the relationship pushes Jacob through are what make him worthy of the name Israel – he is one who wrestles with God and endures.

In the latter half of the novel, Jacob comes to a revealing conclusion:

> But now at least he understood his religion: its essence was the relation between man and his fellows. Man's obligations toward God were easy to perform.… They slandered their fellow men, but demanded meat doubly kosher. They envied, fought, hated their fellow Jews, yet still put on a second pair of phylacteries. Rather than troubling himself to induce a Jew to eat pork or kindle a fire on the Sabbath, Satan did easier and more important work, advocating those sins deeply rooted in human nature. (*The Slave*, 183)

In this remark is condensed a key argument of my thesis. The ritualistic ornamentation of religion is ultimately secondary, and what is primary are the relations between man and his fellows which religion facilitates. Here recurs also a point of contrast discussed above between Christianity and Judaism. As argued by Wilson and Durkheim, and as depicted in *Silas Marner*, in mainstream classical Christianity the righteous acts and everyday moral behaviour are one and the same. There is no kosher food or a set of cleansing rituals where the believer could off-load his moral duties. Jacob comes to realise this moral hazard inherent in a religion like Judaism. Co-operation between man and his fellows cannot function properly if each is solely focused on pleasing God while neglecting the fellow man. Focusing on rituals instead of ordinary morality is similar to Silas' blinkered focus on money. Neither approach facilitates harmonious co-operation, through neither route do many become one.

A crucial premise behind this thesis has been that not only is literature a justifiable approach to the study of religion's function, it is a distinctly effective one. The two novels here analysed have offered us intricate psycho-social illustrations of human nature. They allow us to peer into the mechanism behind the functioning of a society in the manner of a simulated case-study. I argue that this study offers grounds for taking seriously the notion that a neglectful, dismissive attitude towards religion is too hasty.

Should we follow Durkheim's thinking, even if people reject all traditional religion, faith will ultimately only change form, with new sacred, untouchable beliefs replacing the old. Then again, Durkheim may be too much of an optimist regarding the consequences, given the crucial role that religion appears to play in the functioning of both individuals and societies. Illustrative is the way how Jacob's enduring faith ennobled him amid the basest of conditions where religion did not

function. Illustrative also is the way how the loss of his faith first initiated Silas' isolation, and how its recovery later reconnected him to society.

As I pointed out above, functionalism is not only interested in how religious beliefs operate, or why people have such beliefs, but also takes seriously the contents of those beliefs. It may be tempting to dismiss the contents as harmful nonsense, but one of my goals in this thesis has been to suggest that such a dismissal may be quite unwise. I have presented David Sloan Wilson's compelling argument that fictional belief systems offer unique benefits that cannot be tapped by more realistic systems. In addition, I have approached this topic by using the concept of prejudice, the related limits of reason, and argued in favour of the latent benefits of seemingly nonsensical beliefs. To conclude this important discussion and to better connect it to literature, Roger Scruton will once more prove helpful. He makes use of the Platonic concept of a "noble lie" ("Should he have spoken?" 92). Scruton defines a noble lie as an untruth which holds a truth within it, or offers access to a truth that would otherwise be inaccessible. A myth that helps us understand reality. For Plato, the Olympians were such noble lies. The common man was able to make use of these mythical figures to reach a better understanding of the human condition. Perhaps literature can also be regarded as a similar form of noble deception. It may well be that fiction in general is the only way to discover in ourselves "virtues that exist only when we find our way to believing in them." (ibid. 92) Paradoxically, by immersing ourselves in unprovable fiction and fabrication, we gain a more acute understanding of the reality around us, and develop in ourselves noble qualities which would otherwise remain impaired.

In light of my analysis I agree with Emile Durkheim and David Sloan Wilson. Religion as it is depicted in the two novels is a beneficial, purposeful force. It is not useless or dysfunctional in character. The purpose of religion as it appears in the novels is to facilitate social cohesion and to motivate co-operation. I am convinced that the functionalist approach is an illuminating way to

study religious themes in literature. The functionalist analysis of religion unlocks novels such as *Silas Marner* and *The Slave* in a persuasive way.

Not only does religious functionalism strengthen literary analysis, I would argue that literary analysis can offer support to the functionalist approach. While literary study may be lacking in its capacity for technical or logical veracity, it has on its side emotional and aesthetic force – the power of a noble lie. Ultimately, I argue the purpose of a thesis like this is not to confirm or to determine, but to suggest or at best to convince. In that sense, it is closer to rhetoric perhaps than it is to philosophy. Indeed, literature can do little to prove that functionalism is a true approach, and the actual proof has to come from other fields. However, while the evidence offered by scholars like Wilson and Durkheim can be used to mount a powerful technical case in support of functionalism, literary analysis, akin to faith or personal experience, has the distinct capacity to transform a supposition into a conviction.

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